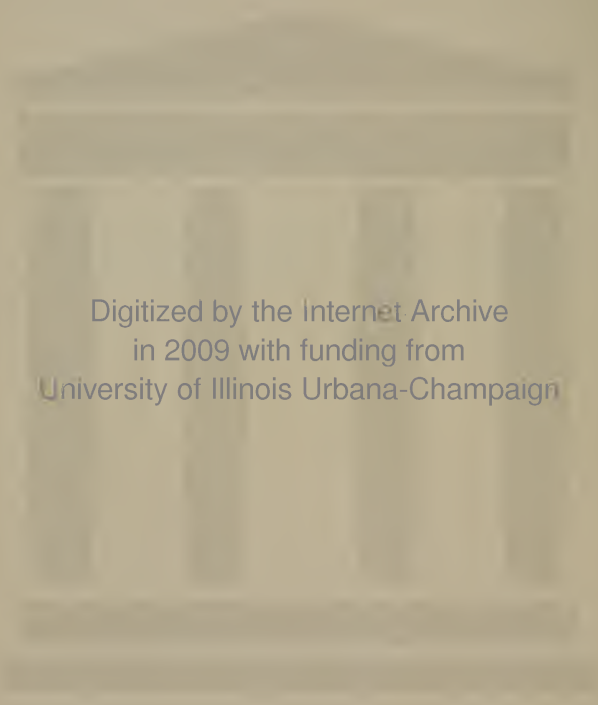


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ON THE SPUR OF THE MOMENT.

VOL. II.



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ON THE SPUR OF THE MOMENT

BY

JOHN MILLS

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“THE OLD ENGLISH GENTLEMAN,”

“TOO FAST TO LAST,”

ETC. ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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ON THE SPUR OF THE MOMENT.

CHAPTER I.

WHAT a most entertaining and delightful correspondent my dear nephew is,' remarked Miss Penelope Peepem, holding a letter in a favourable light so as to peruse it with greater ease through the assistance of a pair of 'clearers,' balanced upon nearly the end of her straight and—as she had been told at more than one Hunt Ball—Grecian nose. 'What an entertaining and delightful correspondent my dear nephew is,' repeated Miss Penelope Peepem, displaying by her earnest

look, and the fixed expression of her smiling countenance, how deeply interested she felt in the letter she was reading partly to herself and partly to her niece who, however, maintained a rigid and frigid silence as the task proceeded towards completion.

‘His description of his landlady, Mrs. Chell,’ continued Miss Penelope Peepem, ‘who I now see he frequently refers to as his dear friend Jenny—’

‘Does he say how old his dear friend Jenny is?’ inquired Griselda, in a somewhat sharp tone of voice, as she leant forward in her chair to eagerly catch the first words of the answer.

Miss Penelope Peepem glanced through the letter hurriedly from beginning to end, and then, failing to obtain the information required, by a rapid movement, went through and between the lines in a quiet, methodical manner, and announced at

length that 'she did not see any mention of Mrs. Chell's certificate of birth.'

Griselda threw back her head with an irritable toss of displeasure, but said nothing in reply.

'Teddy states, however,' resumed her aunt, still perusing the contents of the letter, 'that she is a perfect angel, although on a large scale, and decidedly on the fat side. "Not a button," he writes, "is allowed to be off a single shirt that I possess, and my socks are completely free from holes, so neatly does my dear Jenny darn."' '

There was another angry toss of Griselda's head.

'It affords me much pleasure, and, I may add, infinite consolation,' continued Miss Penelope Peepem, folding up the letter so that the creases might fall neatly into their original places, 'to find that my

dear nephew is so extremely pleased and satisfied with the attentions of his dear Jenny.'

Griselda's chair was evidently anything but an easy one at this particular moment.

'I entertain no doubt that, as he states,' resumed her aunt, 'she is a most sincere friend and charming woman, sustaining her Christian character in her disinterested attention to his shirts and socks. It is truly beneficent on her part,' said Miss Penelope Peepem, closing her eyes and speaking in tremulous accents, 'to take so great a personal interest in the poor orphan lad, and if she does not meet with her full reward in this world, which, I am led to fear, too often falls a little short, I feel the utmost confidence that she will meet with it in the much better world to come. This to me is——'

The sentence remained unfinished from

a succession of choking sobs being filtered through Miss Penelope Peepem's pocket-handkerchief, now pressed closely to her lips.

‘I really see nothing to cry about, aunt dear,’ observed Griselda.

‘He's a poor orphan lad,’ murmured Miss Penelope Peepem through the impediment which rendered her voice somewhat thick and inarticulate. ‘He's a poor orphan lad,’ repeated she.

‘But remarkably strong, healthy, and big,’ rejoined her niece.

‘It consoles me to think that he is,’ returned Miss Penelope Peepem, staunching, if not drying her tears. ‘He's a giant in size, and I am proud and pleased to call him *my* giant; but still he's a poor orphan lad, who, being turned out upon the cold, friendless world to seek the hard means of living——’

‘Through your affectionate liberality, aunt dear,’ interrupted Griselda, ‘he has the means for every possible comfort and requirement.’

‘And shall continue to have them by prompt remittances at periodical dates from the income I receive from my life interest,’—she gently shook her head—‘and so long as that interest does not become in absolute possession of the reversionary estate, repeating nearly the exact words of my man of business when speaking to me a few days since upon this anything but cheerful subject.’

‘Referring to the past and even to the present,’ said Griselda, ‘I cannot think my cousin is an object of much compassion. He does not seem to regret the loss of the society he had here, and appears unusually pleased with the companionship of his dear Jenny.’

‘Not companionship,’ responded Miss Penelope Peepem, closing her eyes and tightly folding her arms in a close link. ‘In writing in somewhat flowery terms of commendation of his landlady, Mrs. Chell, Teddy says not one word as to his companionship with her, and no such construction can be placed upon any sentence or syllable of his most interesting letter. It might, indeed, be rather objectionable, and even indecorous, for Teddy to have expressed supreme pleasure at any personal association with Mrs Chell. As my beloved nephew, I am delighted to think that he has written nothing upon which any such misconstruction can possibly be placed. He describes her, it is true, as an angel on the fat side, and makes particular reference to her kind attentions to his shirts and socks: but there the matter most properly begins and ends. I can

perceive not the slightest evidence of his having been fascinated by them, and my firm, unalterable belief is that his moral rectitude not only continues unimpaired, but remains exalted above the faintest suspicion.'

'You can scarcely approve of his speaking of her as his dear Jenny,' returned Griselda, with pouting lips. 'Such an expression is far too familiar.'

'I might object to it in the abstract,' rejoined Miss Penelope Peepem, 'but, united as it is with full particulars and minute details, I am at a loss to perceive the smallest objection to the term, strong as it may seem in its tone of endearment.'

'I feel the greatest surprise at the support you seem ready to give my cousin's transgressions, aunt dear,' returned Griselda, with her lips still pouting and a brow knitted with anger.

‘If I could possibly view it in the light of a transgression,’ responded Miss Penelope Peepem, with the utmost gravity of tone and demeanour, ‘I should convey my natural indignation in a manner not to be misunderstood by my beloved giant. He would learn that I am not to be trifled with by transgressions of any kind, but more especially with those of the dear Jenny kind. Convinced, however, of his entire innocence from the commission of any transgression we will dismiss the subject from further consideration or discussion. He has my unqualified approval to both write and speak of Mrs. Chell as his dear Jenny.’

Griselda’s lips pouted rather more prominently at the conclusion of the sentence, and the rapid movement of one of her feet upon the floor betokened impatience and general disturbance of the nervous system.

‘If you please, Miss Grizzle,’ said a voice, as the door of the apartment was thrown open with a jerk, ‘Bill Baxter has brought a couple of foxhound puppies from the squire for you to take on walk,’ and there stood Cock Robin with about as modest a bearing as he could assume without a great display of affectation.

‘A couple of foxhound puppies on walk!’ exclaimed Miss Penelope Peepem. ‘What can—what does this mean?’

‘Send old Grumblesome in,’ rejoined Griselda. ‘He will soon give us an explanation.’

‘Are the foxhound puppies to come in with him, Miss Grizzle?’ inquired Cock Robin.

‘Yes,’ returned his young mistress, in a careless tone of indifference. ‘It may be as well, perhaps, for the puppies to accompany old Grumblesome. Their presence

may render him less disagreeable and obstinate than usual.'

'As I am not in the habit of receiving old Grumblesomes or young foxhound puppies,' observed Miss Penelope Peepem, with a stately and dignified air, 'I had better, perhaps, retire.'

'Please remain where you are, aunt dear,' rejoined Griselda, 'and receive the puppies. They are sure to be great beauties, or the squire would not have sent them on walk to his first whip.'

Miss Penelope Peepem's hands were involuntarily raised, and then left to fall gently; but she did not retire.

With commendable promptitude the order given for the appearance of the couple of foxhound puppies and 'old Grumblesome' was obeyed, and, much within measurable distance of the chair in which Miss Penelope Peepem sat in rather

an upright, stiff, and almost starchy position, there they stood, the latter with a hand respectfully lifted to his forehead, and the former with their ears thrown back, and the tips of their sterns waving gracefully, as much as to say: 'We smile upon you, Miss Penelope Peepem, and trust that you will make a fair and equitable return in smiling upon us. We ask no more, Miss Penelope Peepem, not even a biscuit.'

'What loves they are!' exclaimed her niece. 'I always admired the badger-pied.'

Miss Penelope Peepem widely opened her eyes, probably from not having heard of the 'badger-pied' before.

'What is your opinion of them, Bill Baxter?' inquired Griselda, to the second whip, as he held the 'loves' in couples, still staring with smiling countenances

and waving sterns at Miss Penelope Peepem.

‘I should like to have yourn first, Miss Grizzle,’ replied he. ‘You know, or are said to know, as much about a foxhound puppy as I do, and so I should like to have yourn first, Miss Grizzle.’

‘Well, then,’ rejoined the first whip, ‘I’ll begin with their muzzles——’

Miss Penelope Peepem made a sudden start, but subsided immediately afterwards.

‘I don’t think any fault can be found with their muzzles.’

‘I do,’ rejoined Bill Baxter. ‘They’re not the best I’ve seen by a long shot.’

‘What do you say to their backs?’ asked Griselda.

‘What do *you* say about ’em, Miss Grizzle?’

‘Stronger I never beheld for their age,’ returned the first whip.

‘I have,’ added old Grumblesome, ‘in litters out of number.’

‘Then how faultlessly straight their legs are!’

‘I’ve seen straighter.’

‘And rounder feet I never wish to see.’

‘I do,’ briefly returned old Grumblesome.

‘What loins they have and deep quarters!’

Miss Penelope Peepem gave a second start, but again gently subsided.†

‘I’ve seen broader, deeper, and better,’ returned old Grumblesome, ‘times and often.’

‘Their shoulders and elbows, too, are perfection itself.’

‘I never saw perfection yet, in hound or horse,’ added old Grumblesome, ‘neither in man, woman, nor child.’

Miss Penelope Peepem thought that a

voluntary, unprovoked opinion of this kind was little short of inexcusable impertinence on the part of Mr. Bill Baxter, and felt almost disposed to say so on the spot; but her moral courage failed to support the feeble resolution, and she continued, in a temporary state of mental and physical inactivity,

‘Looking at their points altogether,’ resumed Griselda, without taking the smallest notice of old Grumblesome’s adverse criticism, ‘they are perfect pictures to look at.’

‘Handsome is as handsome does,’ remarked he. ‘We shall see what they’ll do when entered.’

‘*I* may,’ responded the first whip, with the laugh that was often heard but not seen. ‘But you, Bill Baxter, are never close enough to hounds to see them work.’

‘I wouldn’t be if I could and I couldn’t

be if I would,' replied he, in a tone which seemed to admit that he was now getting the worst of the argument. 'My place is behind the whole pack, stragglers, babblers, cripples, line hunters, and the flying devils that don't hunt their fox one yard.'

'And you keep your place capitally from the find to the finish,' rejoined the first whip.

'As well as you keep yourn, Miss Grizzle,' returned old Grumblesome, by way of a judicious compromise, remembering, perhaps, that he had been the aggressor. 'As well as you keep yourn, Miss Grizzle,' repeated he, 'the first in the foremost flight, but oftentimes at the risk of your precious neck.'

Miss Penelope Peepem exclaimed 'Oh !' and brought the palms of her hands together with an energetic clasp. 'I must speak seriously to John Oakacre about

this dreadful hunting. I must, indeed. My peace of mind departed with those frightful words about your precious neck, Griselda. If my entreaty to abandon at once and for ever the risks of this truly dangerous sport is of no avail, I shall supplicate for the powerful aid of Mr. Chickabiddy, who, from the sad experience of his first day's fox-hunting, as he gave me clearly to understand, manfully determined that it should be his last.

Had Miss Penelope Peepem been a keen observer she would have beheld one corner of her neice's upper lip looped up in the form of what is generally called a sneer.

'I do not feel disposed that the person named should interfere in the preservation of my neck, aunt dear,' observed Griselda. 'I shall endeavour to take care of it without his assistance.'

'But still I may reasonably suppose

that he has a voice in the matter,' rejoined Miss Penelope Peepem. 'As your intended——'

'Give my love to the squire,' interrupted Griselda, with an angry gesture, 'and tell him I will take the greatest care of the puppies while on walk here. They shall have the best of food and plenty of exercise.'

'That's the training for 'em, Miss Grizzle,' said the second whip. 'If I was a young fox-hound puppy, I should like nothing better than to be under your care.'

'And yet you very seldom agree with me, Bill Baxter,' rejoined Griselda.

'Often, p'r'aps, than you think for, Miss Grizzle,' returned he. 'Like a good many other folks, I don't always say what I mean, and, when it suits my purpose, I'd just as soon tell a lie as speak the truth.'

‘Highly objectionable!’ exclaimed Miss Penelope Peepen, with a shake of the head which for a moment brought the bald spot in view. ‘A most objectionable sentiment!’

‘It may be, ma’am,’ returned old Grumblesome; ‘but it suits me very well, and I mean to stick to it. Speak the truth, I say, when it pays. Tell a lie when it doesn’t. Them’s my sentiments, right or wrong.’

‘What are the names of these puppies?’ inquired Griselda.

‘The squire told me to say, Miss Grizzle, that you were to call ’em what you please.’

‘Then I will name them,’ rejoined the first whip, ‘Grumble and Growler.’

CHAPTER II.

IN the room in which a living judge had studied the rudiments of the law as a preliminary step to his present elevated position on the Bench, Edward Slomax sat one evening poring over the pages of 'Blackstone's Commentaries' until he felt more than wearied with his self-imposed task.

'This is anything but light literature,' said he, throwing his arms upwards and following the action by a loud yawn. 'This is anything but light literature,' repeated he, 'and my head aches and

temples throb with, I suppose, an overdose of "Blackstone's Commentaries."

He threw a glance around the walls of the apartment, upon which hung a few mouldy engravings of robed and wigged Lord Chancellors and Chief Justices, and smiled at the wild extravagance of the thought that his might possibly be added to the collection at some time or other among the portraits of the judges of England.

'And yet,' said he, 'why not? Those old chaps, once upon a time, were young chaps, and seemed to possess no more chance of becoming judges of the land than I do. They worked hard, and I work hard. They, I daresay, hoped more for success than expected it, and so do I; but still what came to them in the long run may come to me. When well up in the knowledge of the law, they, of course,

wanted the opportunity for displaying their knowledge, and it is fair to suppose they had it in the long run. That's just a parallel case of what mine may be. I mean to know all that can be known by reading hard from six to eight hours a day. No more rowing, no more cricket, no more football for me. I have made up my mind to cram myself full of law until it runs over, and then, like those old chaps there,'—the new student of the Middle Temple made a practical reference, with the sweep of a hand, to the portraits 'all in a row,'—'and await for somebody or something to let others know that I know a good deal more than they know, or are likely to know. I'm afraid that's not very good English, and open to objection from a tautological point of view. No matter, it conveys a plain meaning; which is a great improvement upon better English

delivered in marble halls and upon more important occasions—when, perhaps, the destiny of a nation is at stake, and not that of a sucking barrister. Now, in my opinion, that's rather neat than otherwise. I, therefore, repeat—for my own satisfaction, and not that of any other living soul, no other living soul being within hearing—when perhaps the destiny of a nation is at stake, and not that of a sucking barrister. I will try, however, a cup of tea, made by Jenny's fair hand, to apply poetical language in lieu of historical, and see if it will remove, or at least modify, this thundering headache. I shall also invite her to relieve me of the labour of pouring out the tea, and share the contents of the teapot, with an equal division of the buttered toast. I must have a few hours' recreation, combined with hard work; and Jenny's society is

of the most refreshing, not to say exhilarating, kind. She shall, therefore, be my guest for the evening ;' and, touching the spring of a small gong upon the table, Mrs. Chell, otherwise 'Jenny,' made an appearance before the shrill sound had ceased to announce that it was required with all expedition.

'Did you ring, sir?' inquired she.

'As nobody in this room could have done so but myself, Jenny,' replied her lodger, 'you may come to the conclusion, without further interrogatories, that it was me who sounded the loud timbrel o'er Egypt's dark sea.'

'And what do you please to want, sir?' asked the relict of the departed Chell, in a cheery voice and manner, and without the faintest trace of sorrow for his having gone in advance. 'And what do you please to want, sir?' repeated she.

‘Three distinct and separate supplies, Jenny, to three distinct and separate requirements,’ replied her lodger, holding up a finger to mark each number of his needs as it was made known.

‘You have only to acquaint me, sir, with what they are,’ rejoined Mrs. Chell, ‘and nothing more is necessary.’

‘To sum up, then—as might, perhaps, be the language of my predecessor in the legal atmosphere of the apartment I now occupy,’ returned Edward Slomax, ‘I want some tea, hot buttered toast, and your cheerful society for the whole of the evening, Jenny.’

Mrs. Chell felt highly complimented, if not flattered, at the last of the requirements; but, not being prepared with a fluent and flowery acknowledgment, briefly expressed her thanks by saying, ‘Thank you, sir.’

‘If not buttered on both sides, Jenny,’ returned her lodger, ‘let the toast be at least well buttered; for I am going to confide the secrets of my heart to you after I have refreshed and fortified myself with tea and buttered toast. I have long since wished to pour forth the locked-up secrets of my heart to you, Jenny, and shall do so at the conclusion of our frugal feast; when, if your hair does not stand on end with amazement, I shall feel sadly disappointed.’

‘What, at my hair, sir?’ asked Mrs. Chell, with a good humoured laugh.

‘Yes,’ responded he, emphatically, ‘at your hair, Jenny, and if each particular one does not stand on end like prickles upon the back of that much abused beast the beetle-devouring hedgehog. Prepare to hear something; but what that something is I scarcely know myself.’

‘Try and recollect, sir,’ suggested Mrs. Chell,’ while I go and get ready the tea and toast.’

‘But to introduce the subject as briefly as circumstances will permit,’ continued he, ‘I will at once confess that I’m in love.’

‘Which is a most natural condition for a gentleman of your——’

‘Weight you would say, Jenny,’ added he, ‘and no doubt you are right in your prompt conclusion. But make preparation at once for our frugal feast, and, upon the disappearance of the tea and toast from natural causes, I will reveal the hitherto hidden secrets of my heart with the most complete and perfect knowledge, Jenny, that the unreserved trust will not be abused by you.’

‘Whatever you please to tell me, sir,’

rejoined Mrs. Chell, 'shall be as safe as if locked up——'

'In the silent tomb,' added her lodger, energetically. 'I know it and fully appreciate the value of my depository for the secrets of my heart. You shall be in possession of them, Jenny, after tea.'

It would achieve no purpose whatever, either good, bad, or indifferent, to conceal the unadorned, simple fact that Mrs. Chell's curiosity was excited to learn the full particulars of these secrets of her lodger's heart.

In a general way he had stated that he was in love, but she now wanted to know with whom, her christian and surname, and address. Whether young, middle-aged, elderly, or old. Whether fat or lean. Whether fair, brown, or black. Whether tall or short. Whether high-born, hedge-

born, or if not, why not and how otherwise?

These with several other minor questions flashed through Mrs. Chell's brain as she proceeded with the utmost alacrity to make preparations for the frugal feast, and, persevering to the end, they were completed in a rational manner, and within reasonable limits.

'Would Mr. Slomax like a little more sugar?'

'Not unless she thought an additional lump would remove or relieve that thundering headache.'

Mrs. Chell 'was not in a position to give a decisive answer as to the probable result; but would hope for the best.'

'I am always hoping, Jenny,' rejoined he, as if speaking in a dream; 'but as the last bit of toast is left blooming alone, and all its companions are swallowed and gone,

clear everything away, and upon the fulfilment of the task I will reveal, Jenny, the hidden secrets of my heart almost broken, but not quite.'

Mrs. Chell 'was more than happy to learn that her lodger's heart if flawed was not beyond repairing.'

Being full to overflowing of expectation, Mrs. Chell made short work of clearing away the things, and quickly settled herself in her chair to listen to the promised narrative.

'I'm in love, Jenny,' commenced he, 'with the prettiest, pluckiest, and jolliest girl in all Hampshire.'

'A county celebrated for its rabbits, sir,' remarked Mrs. Chell, parenthetically.

And then without further introduction Edward Slomax plunged into all the details of his boyish love for his cousin. Told of the means by which he daily

teazed her even to tickling her nose with a feather or straw when asleep, and dwelt in terms of rapture of the way in which she chased and thrashed him round the garden, in and out among the shrubs, up and down the lawn, until compelled to stop and cry aloud for mercy, while Cock Robin stood a looker-on, convulsed with laughter.

At this stage of the revelation Mrs. Chell lifted the corner of her snow-white apron to her lips, and, shutting her eyes, adopted the precedent set long ago by Cock Robin, and became similarly attacked.

In continuation her lodger told her that 'loving her as he did, he never told her so since he was a child, and although he believed that she loved him she had never told her so since she began to study the arts and sciences.'

‘There I think you were wrong, sir,’ responded Mrs. Chell, ‘decidedly wrong. You should have come to an understanding with one another.’

‘Our most lovable of aunts,’ resumed he, ‘had one great and absorbing object in view for my cousin and that was that she should marry a rich man, and had I even hinted the shadow of a thought of my deep affection for her with the view of ultimately marrying her, Jenny, she would have put me down as the greatest rascal that ever lived.’

‘I really don’t see why, Mr. Slomax,’ returned Mrs. Chell. ‘I really don’t see why, sir.’

‘Without a single penny in the world to call my own, and not knowing when, where, or how, to earn or get one,’ added he, ‘was I in a position to say one word about marrying, or try to obtain a promise of any kind in

connection with marriage, however remote might be the indefinite time thought of for its fulfilment, from such a girl as my cousin?' inquired he almost passionately.

'Your most lovable of aunts, sir, has made every arrangement for your being called to the Bar,' observed Mrs. Chell, introducing, as she thought, extenuating circumstances.

'Bar!' exclaimed her lodger, vehemently. 'When called, how do I know that I ever shall get a brief? Or if getting one placed in my hands how do I know that I shall not fail in the case and never get another? Was I to think of marrying the prettiest, pluckiest, and jolliest girl in all Hampshire upon such prospects as these, Jenny?'

Mrs. Chell coughed slightly, but said nothing in reply.

'My aunt,' continued he, 'kind and

generous as she is to a fault, would never have consented to what she must have known to be a certainty for the miserable, poverty-stricken future of her indulged niece, whose wishes and whims, however unreasonable, she gratifies to the fullest extent even when mildly pretending to oppose and resist them.'

Mrs. Chell began to think that any small addition to the extenuating circumstances had better be left in blank, and filled in upon some more favourable opportunity.

'The worst of it is,' continued her lodger, clenching his fists, and hitting out 'one, two' straight from the shoulder, 'my most lovable of aunts has picked out such an unmitigated cad for my cousin to marry. Oh, Chickabiddy! If I only had you here, and you would, or could, stand up before me for just three

minutes and a half by the Middle Temple clock, what a picture you'd be to gaze upon by the philanthropists of Great Britain !'

Mrs. Chell, perceiving the somewhat excited condition of her lodger, felt a slight state of relief that the gentleman referred to by the name of 'Chickabiddy' was not present.

'This deplorable, debased, and execrable snob, Jenny,' continued he, 'talks about being the owner of a gold mine.'

'A gold mine !' exclaimed Mrs. Chell, raising her eyebrows. 'That's a great temptation for any woman, sir.'

'But not for my cousin,' quickly rejoined he. 'I can see that she hates him, gold mine and all.'

'In that case,' returned Mrs. Chell, 'no good can come of such a marriage, with the gold mine thrown in.'

‘That’s just what I think, Jenny,’ responded her lodger. ‘But how is she to be rescued from Chickabiddy’s jaws? Tell me how, Jenny; and I shall look upon you for ever and ever as an angel of light.’

‘There’s but one straight course for you to take, sir,’ returned Mrs. Chell, ‘as far as I know.’

‘Name it,’ he almost shouted.

‘Declare openly your love for——’

‘I dare not,’ interrupted he. ‘I dare not, Jenny. It would break my most lovable aunt’s heart to know that I was such a scoundrel.’

‘But you can tell her, Mr. Slomax,’ added she, ‘that, like other young men, you mean to work, and, like other studious and steady young men, make your way in the world.’

‘She would remind me, Jenny,’ he re-

plied, combing his hair back from his forehead with the divided fingers of one hand, 'that I was not in the tripos.'

'But you were——'

'Stroke oar in the winning eight against Oxford,' added he. 'But that won't do.'

'And you were——'

'Captain in the eleven when we licked Oxford at cricket. But that won't do.'

'Now, then, comes the question, Mr. Slomax. What will do?' rejoined Mrs. Chell, who, apparently, was a little out of tune with the negatives.

'Nothing,' rejoined he, in a tone and manner of absolute despair. 'Nothing, Jenny. She, the prettiest, pluckiest, and jolliest girl in all Hampshire, must be left to the jaws of Orlando Chickabiddy, and be swallowed.'

Mrs. Chell rose from her chair with a

slow and stately movement, and, fixing a serious and determined look upon her lodger's lined and anxious features, said,

‘Not if I were a man, sir, and loved her as you do. Good night, Mr. Slomax.’

CHAPTER III.

JOHN OAKACRE, Esq., M.F.H., of Oakacre Court, was pacing up and down the floor of his library after breakfast one morning, or, to be particular, after breakfast time—for he had eaten nothing from a total want of appetite—with the restless, aimless, and pointless motion of a bear in a cage. A newspaper was held in one of his hands to which he momentarily referred, and seemed to be absorbed in the intelligence rendered in one short paragraph under the head of ‘City News.’

‘I can’t understand it!’ ejaculated he.

‘A fall of six per cent. in our gold mine shares in one day, and now, instead of standing at three per cent. premium, they left off, it states here, at three per cent discount. I begin to feel alarmed,’ continued John Oakacre, crumpling up the ill-omened journal in the form of a wisp. ‘I begin to feel alarmed,’ repeated he, ‘not only for myself, but for my friends and neighbours who have entered into this venture with me and, confessedly, upon my representations of its being a magnificent property. But, if magnificent, how is it that the shares fall six per cent. in one day? The company has not been floated, to use one of Mr. Chickabiddy’s Stock Exchange phrases, for more than a week, and, instead of being able to realize my shares at a large profit, as he emphatically assured me would be the case, I should now have to sell them at a considerable loss. To pay the deposit

money upon application for so large a number,' continued he, 'was exceedingly inconvenient. I had to borrow the whole amount from my bankers who, knowing what I wanted it for, were not particularly disposed to grant my request, if I may judge from the hesitating manner in which they acceded to it. I really must see Chickabiddy upon this matter without the delay of an hour, and try to investigate it to the fullest extent, even to the very bottom; for I begin to feel most uneasy about it—painfully uneasy.'

The squire had scarcely finished the sentence and was biting his lips with feverish impatience, when he became conscious of the presence of the person he had just referred to, following an announcement being made of his immediate approach.

'Ah, Chickabiddy!' he exclaimed, slight-

ly surprised at seeing his visitor, 'I was just about starting for a ride to Hawkhurst in the hope of finding you at home.'

'I am glad to have saved you the trouble,' replied Orlando Chickabiddy, without much apparent disturbance of his nervous system, and yet not altogether accompanied by his usual self-possession.

'Take a chair,' rejoined the squire. 'I wish to learn from you the cause of the great and sudden fall in the value of our shares in the Gold Mine Company, which I see in this morning's paper fell six per cent. in one day.'

Mr. Chickabiddy's features became illuminated with a faint and sickly smile which in no way improved the expression of them.

'To me,' continued the squire, 'this appears an announcement of coming disaster, and for which some explanation

will be expected by those who have risked so much upon the responsibility of what I have both said and done.'

Mr. Chickabiddy's smile became fainter and fainter, and, as the squire completed the sentence, no trace of it remained where it had been a very short time before. Try as he would—and try as he did—Mr. Orlando Chickabiddy could smile no more at that precise moment of his sublunary existence. A thought flashed through his brain as to what Mrs. Chickabiddy might say upon the subject when it came to be discussed between them.

'You are alarmed, my dear sir,' replied he, 'at what you have seen in the City article of this morning's paper; but there is really nothing in it.'

'I see quite enough,' rejoined the squire, 'to fill me with the greatest apprehension.'

‘The object of my being here so soon after breakfast this morning, my dear Mr. Oakacre,’ returned his visitor, ‘is to remove the cause of your natural and reasonable fear. I thought what must be the state of your feelings as soon as I saw that the Bears had been at us.’

‘The Bears!’ exclaimed the squire, with intense astonishment depicted upon his countenance. ‘Who or what on earth are the Bears?’

‘The direct and distinct opposite of what are called the Bulls,’ replied Mr. Chickabiddy. ‘The Bears go for the fall; the Bulls go for the rise, and, their respective operations being successful in the ordinary course of events, the Bears secure their profits by the dropping of the quoted prices of the stocks and shares in which they gamble; while the Bulls, going for the rise, make their profits by forcing up

the stocks and shares in which *they* gamble.'

'But I was not aware, sir,' rejoined Squire Oakacre, drawing himself up to his full height, 'that there was to be any disreputable gambling in the shares of our company. I and my friends were led to believe by you, sir, that we were embarking in a sound and eligible undertaking, and that nothing could be more positively certain—gold having been discovered in unheard of quantities in the Longitudinal Section—than that we, each and all, might confidently look forward to profitable and gratifying results.'

'And so you may, sir,' sharply retorted Mr. Chickabiddy, in a voice and manner indicative of feeling himself aggrieved at the undisguised attack made upon him by the chairman of the newly-floated company. 'And so you may, sir,' repeated he. 'I am not personally responsible for

the attack of the Bears. It is an operation of the most common and every-day kind on the Stock Exchange, and not unfrequently closely followed up by a counter attack on the part of the Bulls.'

'Am I to understand,' said the squire, 'without any real or substantial cause for either?'

'In nine cases out of ten,' rejoined Mr. Chickabiddy, 'the fall and rise are skilfully worked, and depend upon the unscrupulous lies told and circulated upon the Stock Exchange. You can have no conception, Mr. Oakacre,' continued he, smiling, 'of the number of unscrupulous lies that are told daily upon the Stock Exchange.'

'I was totally unaware of this state of things,' responded the squire, beginning to feel that he had been a little too hasty in prejudging Orlando Chickabiddy, and

thought of volunteering an apology without further explanation being rendered upon the subject.

Seeing by a mental glance the advantage of his present position, and knowing that it could not last very long, Mr. Chickabiddy was determined to strengthen it in the meantime.

‘I am a man, sir,’ resumed he, tapping his left breast with the tips of the fingers of his right hand, ‘who when known is certain to be trusted. When not known it is only a question of time for him to have that unlimited confidence placed in his hands which the interval prevents his possessing. My word, Mr. Oakacre, is my bond, and my bond’—the speaker seemed to swell a little as he spoke—‘has hitherto commanded a premium.’

The squire bowed a polite acquiescence, and began to feel that he had entertained,

at least, temporary ungenerous thoughts of the promoter of the Gold Mine Company.

‘That which I say, Mr. Oakacre,’ resumed Orlando Chickabiddy, ‘may be accepted as nothing short of the gospel truth. That which I do, Mr. Oakacre, may be accepted as the act and deed of one of the noblest out-turns of the City of London—’ Mr. Chickabiddy made a most effective and even dramatic pause before completing the sentence—‘an honest man.’

The squire again bowed rather lower than before, but said nothing in reply.

‘Now, sir, I do not hesitate to declare unreservedly, and with the utmost confidence, that no more opportune moment could possibly be for averaging your shares than the present.’

‘Averaging my shares!’ repeated the chairman of the Gold Mine Company,

evidently bewildered. 'What does that mean?'

'It means this, sir,' responded Mr. Chickabiddy. 'Having had your shares allotted to you at par, you have now the golden opportunity, through the onslaught of the Bears, to purchase an additional number in the open market under par. Between par and below par, or at the present quoted price of three per cent. discount, you will at once arrive at the profitable average between the two.'

'But what real advantage will that be to me?' asked the squire, somewhat confused with the 'pars,' 'discounts,' and 'averages.'

'Great,' rejoined Mr. Chickabiddy. 'Whether regarded in the light of an investor or speculator, it cannot fail to be of the greatest advantage to you, sir. In holding the shares bought at a discount

you possess them at a price less than their intrinsic value. If on the other hand you determine to realize them upon their going up above the price that you purchase them at, you simply pocket the difference between the purchase and the sale. Nothing, my dear sir, can be clearer or more obvious.'

'But in the event of their not going up,' returned the squire, 'what then?'

'You are supposing an impossibility,' added Mr. Chickabiddy extending his arms with the palms of his hands turned outwards. 'One might as well suppose,' continued he, 'that the river Thames will turn round and run towards Oxford as that the shares of the company of which you are the honoured chairman will not rise again far above what they have already stood at. A gold mine, now ascertained to be yielding, as a minimum,

four ounces to the ton of quartz quarried, must command the floating capital of the British public. In order that I may be perfectly understood, I repeat, sir, must command the floating capital of the British public.'

'A further purchase of shares will involve an additional advance of money,' said the squire, with a fixed and reflective stare upon the carpet.

'Not necessarily,' responded Mr. Chick-abiddy, with a bland smile. 'Not necessarily, my dear sir. If prudently resolved to average your shares by increasing your investment the matter can be financed without the production of a single shilling of hard cash. The Chancellor of the Exchequer himself has, occasionally, to finance, and you will remember that exchequer bills are from time to time issued for the temporary convenience of

the nation. In the place of exchequer bills we will finance the matter by issuing yours, my dear sir. I will draw upon you for the whole amount required; get my bankers to cash the paper; instruct my broker to buy the shares, and, upon the Bulls coming in to take the place of the Bears, order him to sell them in time to retire your acceptances prior to their falling due. So that, in fact, my dear sir, all that you will have to do will be to sign your name across the stamps which I will provide—a mere matter of form.'

'You really are very kind, Chickabiddy,' replied the squire. 'But I fear that I am giving you an immense amount of trouble in carrying out these intricate business arrangements.'

'Say not a word about trouble, my dear sir,' returned the promoter of the great Gold Mine Company. 'I'm a business

man. What fox-hunting is to you business is to me. The more I have of business the more I want of it, and I shall never have enough if I get more than I want.'

'I scarcely know——'

'The meaning of the word,' added Mr. Chickabiddy; 'but in due course of time you will, my dear sir; or I'm greatly mistaken.'

'Under your skilful guidance I may do so,' returned the squire; 'but I fear that your pupil will prove to be a great tax upon your patience.'

'Leave all to me, my dear sir,' said Mr. Chickabiddy, rising from his chair as an introductory movement to taking his departure.' 'Leave all to me, my dear sir,' repeated he, 'and your brightest visions of wealth shall all be realized.'

Upon mounting the animal bearing the

alleged resemblance to a camel, which stood at the porch of Oakacre Court, Mr. Chickabiddy might have been seen struggling to stifle a laugh of no ordinary explosive force.

‘Upon my sacred word of honour,’ said he, in a muttered tone, designed to be overheard by no one, ‘the longer I live the more fools I meet, lunatics at large. It’s impossible to avoid them if one would. They run against you in the highways, byways, lanes, streets, and alleys. Put your hands in our pockets, they say, which we keep unbuttoned for your special convenience, and ease us of our money. It’s much too heavy for us to carry. Take it. Well, we respond to the invitation and do as we are told. We take it, and the exchange is naturally effected between those who have brains and those who have not. I have brains. John Oakacre, Esquire, of

Oakacre Court has none, and the consequence, therefore, will be that I shall have his money, and he will find himself without it—his pocket lightened from the weight, as most fools' pockets are in the long run.'

Mr. Chickabiddy chuckled as was his wont when exceptionally pleased with his own reflections; but stopped abruptly as if a thought of anything but a hilarious nature had suddenly presented itself.

'But what,' said he, drawing a long face with his lower jaw dropped, 'will Mrs. Chickabiddy say?'

CHAPTER IV.

MRS. JOHN SPRAT—most improperly and too often vulgarly spoken of and addressed by the rude boys of the village as ‘ Jack Sprat ’—was unusually tall of stature, unusually devoid of fat, as far as could be seen, and possessed of a countenance made up generally of a large, hooked nose, closely set small black eyes, and a mouth which from its extreme range seemed to terminate where it began at remote angles. Her skin was yellow, approaching to orange tint, relieved with freckles in great abundance, and an irresistible thought arose,

when the spectator's look became fixed upon her nose, that Mrs. John Sprat must belong to an extinct class of parrots of great size and devoid of plumage.

Her dress, the seasons round, was of the simplest kind, consisting of a washed-out brown holland gown, fastened round the throat by a single horn button, and left in other respects to sit closely to her figure as it could, or float idly in the wind as sometimes it would. A cap, not generally of snowy whiteness, answering the two-fold purpose of a day and nightcap, covered her tresses of doormat thickness and colour, and a deep frill flapping over her nose, completed the personal appearance and outward effect of Mrs. John, otherwise 'Jack Sprat.'

It may be mentioned, however, that this cap, with a deep frill flapping over her features, invariably stood 'cocked' on one side

of her head, lending a jaunty and almost defiant expression to them.

Among the collective and several annoyances of Mrs. John Sprat's diurnal existence was the great want of punctuality in the doctor's appearance at dinner time. Do what she would, and say what she did, Tom Tidy paid little or no attention to either. In vain she repeatedly called his attention to the fact that it was worse than useless to get his mutton chop cooked to a turn upon the gridiron or boil his mealy potato to the last scientific bubble in the pot. He was never ready to give fair play to her culinary art, but always arrived when both were cold, tasteless, and spoiled. She did her best ; but from what she could see she might as well do her worst. To all this, however, Tom Tidy turned a deaf ear, or if hearing was totally indifferent to what was said upon the subject, and proceeded to eat

his mutton chop in silence long after it had become cold, tasteless, and indigestible.

Having been for a hunt of some three hours after a fly scientifically called 'Bombylius Medius,' which eluded his capture, notwithstanding an exhibition of great patience and endurance, Time, like the insect, had been on the wing, but without Tom Tidy devoting a single thought upon the speed of his flight. As usual, therefore, he was late, too late, for perfecting the mutton chop and mealy potato which Mrs. John Sprat now placed before him with an air of triumph.

'I've not tried to keep 'em hot this time,' said she, with bitter severity in her tone, 'and never will again. If back in time, well and good. If not back in time, well and bad. I shall take no pains for the future in keeping or trying to keep them hot. I have done with it, sir.'

‘Pray control your temper, Mrs. John Sprat,’ responded the doctor, in a quiet tone and most placid manner. ‘I’m quite contented with the viands as you have placed them before me.’

‘They look nasty enough,’ rejoined she, with increasing acerbity of temper, ‘and I hope they taste as they look.’

‘Anyone been here during my temporary absence?’ asked the doctor.

‘Your temporary absence,’ rejoined Mrs. John Sprat, with a sarcastic laugh, ‘means that you are always out skimming after flies, butterflies, and such-like.’

Paying no heed to the reproof, Tom Tidy repeated his question.

‘Yes, there has,’ was the short and sharp answer of Mrs. John Sprat.

‘Who?’ briefly inquired he, noiselessly dropping his knife and fork, and looking with an earnest gaze at his assistant, who

stood with folded arms, as if prepared for any emergency.

‘That chap Cock Robin, as he’s called,’ she replied, ‘and a worse or more owdacious chap doesn’t live in these parts.’

‘What did he come for?’

‘A dose.’

‘And——’

‘I gave him one.’

‘Aqua puera, of course,’ added the doctor, with great complacency, as he resumed the offices of the knife and fork.

‘Not this time,’ returned Mrs. John Sprat, with an expression approaching malignity. ‘Not this time,’ repeated she. ‘I thought I’d make a change.’

Tom Tidy’s knife and fork dropped in his plate with a loud chatter, and his look was that of extreme dread of what he felt was about to be revealed.

‘A change,’ said he, in tremulous accents.

‘Yes,’ replied his assistant, compressing her lips and rolling her head from side to side. ‘He came this morning, and, as usual, said, “Jack Sprat, I want a dose.” Said I, “What’s your symptoms?” Said he, “My symptoms be blowed. Give me a dose, Jack Sprat.” Said I to myself, “You shall have a dose and a change of physic *this* time. It shan’t be out of the old bottle.”’

‘From what bottle, then, did you take it?’ almost groaned the doctor, seeing preparations for a coroner’s inquest not far off.

‘I poured out a full vial, a good two ounce, from the dark green one next the old bottle, thinking it would do him more good’—Mrs. John Sprat laughed loudly

at this juncture, and then resumed—‘as it might be a little bit stronger than *aqua puera*.’

‘A little bit stronger,’ gasped Tom Tidy.

‘Yes,’ continued Mrs. John Sprat; ‘I thought it not unlikely, as I never heard of *aqua puera* making anybody worse than before, and most of the other stuffs you give the people do, if they speak the truth.’

The doctor looked at his assistant in mute silence for a few seconds, and then said, in a voice scarcely audible,

‘Did he swallow the decoction?’

‘Not in the shop,’ replied Mrs. John Sprat. ‘He paid twopence for it, and after making all the fun of me he could by calling me Jack Sprat, and asking whether it was I who loved the fat or my husband the lean, and if between us

we didn't manage to lick the platter clean, he left, saying that he would swallow the dose just before dinner, to strengthen his appetite.'

'Strengthen his appetite!' repeated Tom Tidy, with all the palpable effects of an attack of paralysis. 'He will never know again what an appetite is. He's a dead Cock Robin!'

'Dead!' exclaimed Mrs. John Sprat, whose turn had now arrived for feeling alarm, not far removed from extreme terror.

'It was poison for rats,' almost shrieked the doctor, so shrill were the notes of his voice; and then, clasping his forehead between both hands, he reiterated, in almost a hollow, sepulchral tone, 'It was poison for rats.'

'It won't kill him. Say it'll not kill him. Please say it will not kill him

quite,' exclaimed Mrs. John Sprat, wringing her hands, 'and my mind will be relieved!'

'Let us think more of relieving his stomach,' responded Tom Tidy, springing from his chair with a vigorous effort. 'Get the stomach pump, and follow me.'

'Where is it?' was the question, almost asked in a scream, by Mrs. John Sprat. 'Oh, say where is the stomach pump, or I may be condemned to be hanged for murder!'

Drawer after drawer in the shop was opened with a jerk, and closed with a slam, without the instrument being found; but at last it was discovered where least expected.

'Follow me,' shouted the doctor, clutching it, and rushing, bareheaded, through the door into the road without. 'Follow me.'

The order was promptly obeyed by Mrs. John Sprat, who ran at her best pace so closely upon her employer's heels, that the danger seemed imminent of her treading upon them.

CHAPTER V.

HAVING had his joke with Mrs. 'Jack Sprat,' by putting the pointed and personal questions as to the fat and the lean, and the united labour of herself and husband in licking the platter clean, Cock Robin had resigned himself to the pleasurable anticipation of a remarkably good, albeit plain, dinner, and was watching the cook in the interesting act of 'serving up,' with eyes glistening with epicurean delight.

'I should say, cooky,' observed he, sitting in a chair already placed close to the table, and balancing a knife playfully be-

tween a finger and thumb in readiness to begin, 'that that's a leg of mutton.'

'Cooky,' who was always ready to laugh immoderately at anything said or done by the low comedian of Forester's Lodge, began to shake with an eruption of mirth, and wished to be informed, 'If not a leg of mutton, what else could it be?'

'I like leg-of-mutton-day,' rejoined Cock Robin, 'better than any other day in the week, including Sunday, when I have nothing to do but look on. The suet-pudding cut in slices under it, with the gravy nicely dropping on 'em until they're a rich brown, put me in mind of what that heavenly food manna must be.'

'Cooky' thought the conclusion of the sentence just delivered most objectionable, in a theological point of view, and became serious on the instant.

'I'll thank you not to mix up suet-

pudding with religion, Mr. Cock Robin. As the parson would tell you, the thought of the one doesn't agree with the thought of the other, and both can't be inwardly digested at the same precise moment of time. Things for the body are quite different from things for the soul.'

'Give me things for the body,' rejoined he. 'I seem to understand 'em better.'

'Which shows that heathens are still to be found,' returned 'Cooky,' 'without much time being lost in searching for them.'

'Ha, ha, ha !' laughed Cock Robin. 'Call me a heathen, eh? Well, no matter! Ha, ha——'

The laugh begun was not only checked, but effectually stopped, and remained unfinished from that instant of time and for ever afterwards.

Conscious of some great disturbing

agency in his immediate rear, but not knowing who or what the factor was, Cock Robin found himself suddenly seized from behind round the throat, and pulled firmly backwards against the chair in which he was sitting.

‘What does this all mean?’ he would have said, but the words were choked before they could be uttered.

‘What does this all mean?’ ‘Cooky’ expressed in her looks of unutterable amazement as she saw her fellow-servant, the low comedian of Forester’s Lodge, with a dismal countenance, held in the firm clutch of Mrs. John Sprat, while Tom Tidy was actively occupied with a surgical instrument which he was putting together as speedily as possible with the evident design of performing an operation of ‘urgency.’

‘What does this all mean?’ was the repeated interrogatory of ‘Cooky,’ conveyed in silent astonishment, for she continued to stare with widely stretched eyes and blinkless eyelids.

‘Where’s the vial you got from Mrs. John?’ He had no time to add ‘Sprat.’

‘I took it——’

‘Not a single moment is to be lost,’ interrupted the doctor. ‘Bring me a pail of water. We’ll pump him in and then pump him out. It’s the only way to make sure of saving his life if the poison has not been already absorbed into his system, which is more than doubtful. Hold him fast, Mrs. John.’

Taking a still firmer clutch upon his throat, Cock Robin felt himself in a state of complete helplessness and at the entire mercy of Mrs. John Sprat, whose manly

grasp brought forcibly to his mind what a similar sensation would be, if held by an iron vice with a powerful leverage.

Mechanically, but quickly, a pail of water was brought by 'cook,' whose every action betrayed the greatest consternation, and set in front of the now refractory patient, who began to exhibit a rebellious spirit by kicking out behind and before in a manner totally regardless of all consequences.

'Hold him fast, Mrs. John,' said the doctor, 'and I'll soon have the gag in.'

'I've got him,' replied his assistant, 'and I'll hold him, never fear, until you tell me to let go.'

Cock Robin, hearing this, and feeling, practically, the force of the expressed intention, gave up all further resistance, and became passively resigned to whatever might follow.

That part of the machinery belonging to the stomach pump called the 'gag' having been thrust between Cock Robin's jaws, the flexible tube was inserted through the centre, and so passed gently and steadily direct below, when the 'pumping in' commenced, and the water quickly subsided in the pail from the operation of the transfer.

'Let him have another gallon,' said Mrs. John Sprat. 'Wash him out clean while you're about it.'

Tom Tidy's professional opinion was, however, that enough water had been 'pumped in,' and the next act of expediency for effecting the special purpose of rendering the poison for rats innocuous was to reverse the movement of the machine, and 'pump him out.'

With commendable energy, combined with great good will, Tom Tidy set the

piston in motion again, and a vacuum was soon afterwards produced in Cock Robin's stomach.

'There,' said the doctor. 'If your life is not safe, nothing can make it safer that I know of.'

'Was he, then, in danger?' asked 'cooky,' recovering at length her faculties of speech.

'Great,' shortly and sharply replied the doctor.

'From swallowing what?' inquired 'cooky,' who began to be enlightened as to the object of applying the stomach pump.

'Poison,' responded Mrs. John Sprat. 'Poison for rats.'

The gag being removed, and his throat released from Mrs. John Sprat's embrace, Cock Robin felt enabled to give vent to his pent-up feelings, and at once proceeded

to convey a most emphatic denial to this assertion in the most positive form.

‘I say it’s a lie, Jack Sprat,’ rejoined he, trying to regain his lost and expended breath, ‘and as big a lie as ever you gave tongue to. I didn’t swallow your beastly stuff; and knowing that I might be pison’d if I did, I never intended to swallow it.’

‘You said that you took it,’ returned Tom Tidy, beginning to feel apprehensive that a little professional error might have been committed. ‘You said that you took it,’ repeated he, appealing to ‘Cooky’ with outstretched arms for confirmation of the statement.

‘But you didn’t wait to hear where I took it,’ added Cock Robin, in a faint voice and feeble manner, ‘before shoving that long thing down my throat, and begin pumping away at me as if I was a water

cart. I call such treatment of a fellow Christian scandalous !’

‘You said that you took it,’ repeated the doctor, determined to justify or, at least, extenuate his little professional error as far as might be possible under existing circumstances.

‘Took it !’ reiterated Cock Robin. ‘Yes, I took it to the stable and threw it down the drain so that it mightn’t make a dog sick.’

‘You should have explained this before,’ said Tom Tidy, in as bland a voice and manner as he was master of, ‘and then all unpleasant consequences would have been avoided.’

‘It was Jack Sprat’s doing, I know,’ responded Cock Robin, sulkily, ‘but I’ll let her have it back again before long. She shall remember spoiling my dinner on leg-of-mutton-day.’

Without waiting longer for any addition to be made to Cock Robin's threats of revenge for the grievous wrong he had met with at the united hands of Doctor Tom Tidy and his assistant, they took their departure from the kitchen of Forester's Lodge, confessing to each other that a little professional error had been committed, but for which, however, there was much to be advanced by way of excuse.

CHAPTER VI.

JOHN OAKACRE, Esq., M.F.H., arrived one morning at Forester's Lodge much earlier than the ordinary cause of an ordinary visit might be supposed to justify, and as he sat restlessly in his chair in the presence of Miss Penelope Peepem and her niece, twitching the toe of a stretched-out boot with the point of his riding whip, a correct inference might have been drawn that something was pressing upon his mind in the shape of a responsibility from which he was desirous of being promptly relieved.

‘And how are Grumble and Growler?’ inquired Griselda, who, perceiving the indications of the squire’s mental disturbance, felt that ‘the something on his mind’ referred probably to herself, and ought, if possible, to be avoided.

‘They are the best looking of our young entry,’ replied he, ‘and I have no doubt will turn out the best. A couple of more beautiful or symmetrical puppies I never wish to see.’

‘And their condition?’ rejoined Griselda. ‘Not too fine drawn, I hope.’

Miss Penelope Peepem slightly raised her hands and lifting her eyes to the ceiling gave a sigh which could not be mistaken as to its depth.

The squire smiled.

‘No,’ returned he. ‘In my opinion neither is a pound too light or a pound too heavy.’

‘That’s the perfection of condition,’ added Griselda, ‘and just what I intended they should be when taken from walk by old Grumblesome.’

Miss Penelope Peepem repeated her sigh which, if anything, was rather more audible than before.

After a slight pause the squire remarked, making at the same time a severe cut at the toe of his boot,

‘The cause of my early visit here, to-day, is of much greater importance than anything connected with foxhound puppies.’

Griselda darted a fiery glance at the squire, and threw herself back in her chair with a gesture of the utmost impatience.

She felt instinctively the object of the squire’s early visit.

‘I am here,’ said he, in a hesitating

voice and confused manner, 'as Mr. Chickabiddy's advocate.'

'How is the good man's leg?' asked Miss Penelope Peepem. 'I sent yesterday to inquire, with Griselda's affectionate love, expressing the fervent hope that he was free from pain.'

The fiery glance was now turned with full force upon the last speaker.

'I sent no such message,' rejoined her niece, with the corner of her upper lip looped so as to expose to view some exceedingly white teeth. 'I sent no such message,' repeated she.

'No, my dear,' returned Miss Penelope Peepem, with a flutter of the little lace cap which more than threatened to publish the circular bald spot; 'but, then, you ought to have sent one, and I considered it my paramount duty to supply your marked and highly censurable error of omission.'

‘I suppose he was in bed,’ observed Griselda, with the white teeth still in view. ‘Whenever he gets a scratch, even in his little finger, he is sure to go to bed.’

‘It was not a scratch upon his little finger,’ said Miss Penelope Peepem, with great gravity of demeanour, ‘that impelled the poor sufferer to go to bed; but a decided bite in the leg.’

‘For which Sam is much to be pitied,’ added Griselda. ‘Poor, dear Sam! He was sick for nearly an hour afterwards, although I gave him a large bit of sugar to take the taste out of his mouth.’

‘But what shall be said of poor Mr. Chickabiddy?’ asked her aunt, gravely. ‘Have you no compassion for your intended husband?’

‘It was the result of his own awkwardness,’ replied Griselda. ‘In coming into the room he blundered against Sam, and,

treading heavily upon one of his feet, the dear, sensible dog reminded him that he possessed feelings as well as himself, and let his tormentor understand what they were in a very natural way.'

'By making his teeth meet in the most developed part of his leg,' added her aunt. 'A most savage attack, in my opinion, and a lasting stain upon Sam's general good character for consideration, kindness, and forbearance to everyone and everything, even to the blind old bantam which he loves to carry about tenderly in his mouth.'

'Poor, dear fellow!' exclaimed Griselda. 'I began to fear that he would never get the taste of Mr. Chickabiddy's leg out of his mouth. He was so dreadfully sick.'

There was now a pause in the discussion which the squire thought might be a favourable opportunity for commencing the

address he had come specially to make upon Orlando's behalf.

‘The injury to Chickabiddy’s leg is little more than skin deep,’ said he, ‘and therefore——’

‘He has taken to his bed,’ added Griselda.

‘We can at any rate,’ returned the squire, ‘dismiss this part of the subject. There is not much the matter with Chickabiddy’s leg, and Sam has recovered from his sickness.’

‘For which I cannot be too thankful,’ added Griselda. ‘Poor dear fellow! He was so very sick that I began to fear that he had been really poisoned.’

The squire once more applied the point of his riding-whip to the toe of his boot and then began the serious introduction of the subject which pressed sorely upon him in the shape of a responsibility.

‘I am here,’ said he, addressing Griselda, ‘to frankly ask you to name an early day for carrying out your engagement to marry my friend, Orlando Chickabiddy, who, with unremitting care and attention has now everything prepared for the reception of his bride that gold can produce, and should anything appear to be wanting I am commissioned by him to state that you have only to make known your wishes for the void to no longer exist even in a thought.’

‘A most generous and noble offer,’ responded Miss Penelope Peepem, in a flutter of great excitement, ‘and quite worthy of the tender source from whence it emanates.’

Griselda darted a passionate look at her aunt, but maintained unbroken silence.

‘The time has arrived——’

‘It appears, indeed, that it has,’ interrupted her niece, vehemently, as the words seemed to hiss between her clenched teeth, ‘but I have something to urge for a little merciful delay. As both of you well know, I yielded a reluctant consent to become this man’s wife, upon your urgent and repeated solicitations. The more than probable consequences of my persistent refusal were continually pointed out to me in language impossible to admit of two meanings. I might be at any time homeless and friendless, and as little capable, as you said, of fighting the battle of life or getting the simple means of existence as a child still nursed in its mother’s arms. These were the words addressed to me when the often-repeated subject of my contemplated marriage with Mr. Chickabiddy was mentioned. As you will admit, I resisted all the force of your persuasion

in my power, but at length gave way, as most things must, before a superior force. I began to fear, and then believe, that I might be homeless and friendless, and at last said yes with my lips to become what I can only be in name, when my heart replied emphatically no. It was my unalterable resolve, however, when I gave my consent, not to be too precipitate in the fulfilment of my promise, and I am quite unprepared to name a time for carrying out Mr. Chickabiddy's wishes, opposed as they are to my own inclination. I will do so, having entered into the engagement, at no distant date; but not yet.'

More from her decided tone and manner than her words, the squire knew that no argument would prevail over Griselda's determination that morning, and rising from his chair he shook her warmly by the

hand, saying, preparatory to his departure,

‘Try to think of this in a better spirit. Your permanent interests and welfare are at stake, and have alone been thought of by your aunt and myself, and considering what the power of wealth is, and the happiness it commands, I feel convinced that you will never have cause to regret following our advice in the most important step to be taken in yours or any woman’s life.’

The squire having quitted the room, Miss Penelope Peepem crossed her hands before her, and squaring her elbows in a stiff and formal manner, with her eyes cast upon the floor, observed,

‘Referring for a moment only to Mr. Chickabiddy’s natural wish for a termination to be put to his agonising suspense, I must think the time has arrived——’

Before another syllable of the sentence

could be continued, she became sensible of the sharp closing of a door.

Upon looking up, Miss Penelope Peepem found herself in full possession of her own exclusive society.

CHAPTER VII.

It was early in the morning of the last day of November, and, therefore, the concluding one of the first month of regular hunting with the Oakacre hounds, when Bill Baxter was seen stumbling and shambling along the high-road mounted on a horse which might have been in the foremost flight in days gone by, but now exhibiting higher qualifications for a more modest place in the extreme rear. Time and the seasons had produced the change.

‘Come up, old ’oss,’ said he, reminding him with a touch of the spurs that his

immediate duty was to stand upon his legs if he desired to avoid a sharp repetition of the practical notice.

Early as was the hour, the second whipper-in was already equipped in his hunting livery, time-worn, faded, and stained.

‘I wonder what’s up this morning?’ said he, taking off his cap and examining the outside of a sealed note lying about the middle of the crown upside down. ‘There’s something more than I know or can guess,’ continued he; ‘but the secret’s there, and I suppose I shall know all about it presently. The squire looked precious pale when he gave it to me to bring to Miss Grizzle, and I feel in’ards that the something up is not altogether a pleasant something.’

He had scarcely concluded the sentence when the entrance to Forester’s Lodge was

gained with a few additional stumbles and corrections for stumbling addressed to the 'old 'oss,' and a hearty welcome followed in the form of a loud greeting from the stentorian lungs of Cock Robin, engaged in the light occupation of sweeping up a few crisp and faded leaves scattered on the gravel-path before him.

'Why, what has brought you here, Bill, thus early?' said he, advancing with a roll and a swagger towards him.

'The squire's orders,' was the prompt reply, 'and this old 'oss—a staggering, blundering, dropping, pecking, groggy, rusty old screw that no oiling of your rowels can keep steady on his feet for three strides at a time. Precious hard work, Cocky, I can tell ye, to ride such a stumped-up bit of untanned leather. I wish he was in the liquid state of broth, and then my precious neck might be safer

than it is whenever I have a mount on him.'

'Oh, never mind your precious neck!' rejoined his friend and genial companion. 'That'll be all right until the hangman pays a visit to Winchester jail one morning. But tell me what has brought you here betimes?'

'The squire wants this note given to Miss Grizzle,' responded Bill Baxter, 'and I am to take her answer back as soon as possible; which means as soon as this bless-ed bag of old skin and bones can carry me.'

Cock Robin took the proffered note from the hand of the second whipper-in, and disappeared within the portal of Forester's Lodge with the utmost display of activity.

'I wonder what this is all about?' said Bill Baxter to himself. 'I don't quite

like the outside of things just now. They look to me smoky.'

He was not kept waiting long before Griselda appeared hurriedly reading the note in her hand, and partly equipped in her hunting costume, but her toilet generally anything but complete.

'The squire,' she said, addressing Bill Baxter, with her eyes still bent upon the note, 'is unexpectedly compelled to go to London this morning, and wishes me to take his place and hunt the hounds for him.'

'That's just the right place for the first whip,' responded he, with a grin which brought the angles of his mouth within measureable distance of the lobes of his ears, 'when the huntsman can't be with 'em.'

'I'll do my best——'

'In course you will, Miss Grizzle,' in-

interrupted old Grumblesome, 'and if not quite so much up to the best as it might be, it's sure to be thought so by the gentlemen of the hunt. You, Miss Grizzle, never do anything wrong in their eyes; but, if I did exactly the same thing, I should have mine anything but blessed now and then.'

'Name one,' rejoined Griselda angrily.

'Jamming too close to hounds in a fast run,' returned he, 'and sometimes over-riding them.'

'You never do that,' said Griselda, with a cynical laugh. 'You never do that,' repeated she.

'I wouldn't if I could,' replied Bill Baxter. 'And couldn't if I would. My place is well behind hounds, and it suits me better than to be with 'em at any part of the run, unless it's particularly slow.'

‘The huntsman’s place is to be with his hounds at the find, in the run, and at the finish,’ responded Griselda, adding, while her eyes dilated and flashed with pride, ‘That shall be my place to-day.’

‘Very good, Miss Grizzle,’ added old Grumblesome; ‘and I daresay you’ll keep it from the find to the finish. But I wouldn’t if I could, and couldn’t if I would.’

‘You’ll give me all the help you can,’ returned she, ‘and, remembering what I have to do, not be spitefully jealous of my being M.F.H. for one glorious single day of my life?’

‘I won’t, Miss Grizzle,’ added old Grumblesome. ‘I’ll obey your orders,’ continued he, ‘just as I would the squire’s at a distance; for I don’t like to be too close to him when a little ruffled in his temper, and his hackles are up. He then

scares the very thoughts out of my head, and sets my brains all a-wobbling.'

'You shall have no cause to complain of what I say.'

'You'll not swear, I know, Miss Grizzle,' interrupted old Grumblesome. 'You're too much of a Christian lady for that, or, if you do swear, you'll take precious care, as the parson did, that nobody hears you, which is about as innocent a thing as I know of. Swear if you like, I say, but don't let anybody hear ye, and then no offence is given here below, whatever it may be from whence all blessings flow. That I know very little about.'

'Have the hounds been drafted for hunting to-day?' inquired she.

'Yes,' replied old Grumblesome; 'but if you ride over to the kennels, Miss Grizzle, before going to the meet, and want to make any change, you can do so as well

as the squire, for you know the hounds, and they know you, just the same as if you were their own sister.'

'I'll do so,' rejoined Griselda, 'for I should like to have them as nearly perfect as possible for this one glorious single day of my life, when I'm to carry the horn of a M.F.H.'

'And know how to blow it, too,' returned old Grumblesome, 'and when to blow it, and when not to blow it, and when to chink-wink 'em along, and lift 'em hard when they can't hit the line of their fox, or make a successful cast. That's what you can do, Miss Grizzle, as well as the squire.'

'This is praise indeed from you, Bill Baxter,' added Griselda. 'You never said anything of me or to me half so——'

'Oh, yes, I have,' interrupted he—'not,

perhaps, to ye, but of ye many a time. Praise to people's faces don't mean much, but praise behind their backs may be taken as meant in full, with something to spare.'

'Knowing this for the first time,' rejoined Griselda, 'we shall be on more friendly terms for the future. I will try to forget what you have said to me in the remembrance of what you have said of me.'

'As a fox-hunter, Miss Grizzle,' continued he, 'and a thorough good sportsman, you have no superior in the whole county of Hampshire. You know what hounds and hunting mean, and the difference between riding well and straight to hounds and riding over them.'

'From your remarks, made not long since,' returned she, 'I thought that I

might not be aware of the distinction.'

'You mustn't, Miss Grizzle,' added old Grumblesome, 'believe all I say all at once. I generally keep a little bit up my sleeve. But I must go now, or the squire will be down upon me like a cartload of bricks for keeping him waiting for your answer, Miss Grizzle.'

'Tell him that I will fill his place to-day to the best of my ability, and above all things remember his golden rule to let them alone.'

'That's it, Miss Grizzle,' rejoined old Grumblesome, enthusiastically. 'Leave them alone means patience, and makes hounds work for themselves instead of throwing up their heads when at fault, and looking to the huntsman for help.'

'And the more they get,' added the newly-appointed M.F.H., 'the more they look for. As arranged,' continued she, 'I

will be at the kennels, and inspect the draft, previous to riding to the meet,' and, turning upon her heel, Bill Baxter was left to stumble and shamble back on his road to Oakacre Court.

CHAPTER VIII.

GAZELLE looked, from her dainty tread and general appearance of a peacock in an unusually proud spirit, to fully comprehend that going to the meet on the present occasion was of more than ordinary importance and interest.

High in the air she tossed her head, and then, dropping it between her knees, she again threw it up, with her nostrils distended, snorting and blowing hard with excitement. Her large, full eyes, as black as those of the animal from which she took her name, flashed as she strode along,

turning them backwards every now and then, as if suspicious of approaching danger in the rear, and watching vigilantly for the safety of her rider.

In front of Griselda, the M.F.H. for one day only of the Oakacre hunt, several couples of hounds trotted with their sterns raised and turned over their backs, while some were on either side of Gazelle, and the remainder of the pack straggled independently behind, whipped in by Bill Baxter, at a distance, mounted on the 'old 'oss.'

With her hunting-crop lifted occasionally to the peak of her cap, Griselda acknowledged the salutations and greetings of the villagers and rustics lavishly bestowed upon her in going to the meet, each and all of the enthusiastic spectators being unanimous that neither the M.F.H., Gazelle, hounds, nor even old Grumble-

some himself were ever seen to turn out in better or more sporting form.

From the effect, transitory as it might be, it was conjectured that the time-worn, mud-stained, and dilapidated livery of Bill Baxter had undergone the recent process of renovation. It looked, at any rate, brighter and cleaner than usual, as if a rubbing up, brushing, and sponging had proved highly successful.

Bill Baxter had done his best to make himself and the 'old 'oss' look as smart as possible upon this eventful occasion. Even the girths of his saddle had been whitened to the extreme of whiteness, and nothing done or left undone but with the object of making the general effect as perfect as existing circumstances would permit.

Beacon Hill now came in view, the place of the fixture, and in the distance

might be seen red coats, green coats, black coats, and coats of divers colours, all pointing for the brow of Beacon Hill.

The M.F.H. smiled with satisfaction as the crowd assembling, some mounted and some afoot, proved from the unusual numbers that the rumour of her presence in the place of the squire must have been rapidly circulated far and wide.

‘The first draw,’ she said to herself, ‘the first draw,’ repeated she, ‘is almost a sure find, and if the scent only proves a holding one, we shall have a run that will be remembered.’

A gleam of pale November sunshine broke from between the murky clouds as Griselda with the hounds reached the top of Beacon Hill, and as she reined in Gazelle, and brought her to a standstill, every hat and cap was raised, and the M.F.H. for ‘one day only’ felt that she

possessed a full share of popularity with the squire of Oakacre Court.

‘I’m to my time, I think,’ said the M.F.H., addressing a member of the hunt, and one of the squire’s oldest friends.

‘To a minute,’ replied he, glancing at the dial of his watch, adding, with a good humoured laugh, ‘as a huntsman ought to be.’

A move was now made in the direction of the first ‘draw,’ a large and thickly grown piece of gorse, within little more than a quarter of a mile from Beacon Hill.

Arrived within a few yards of the cover, Griselda closely followed the course invariably followed by the squire, and stopped to glance at the hounds with their faces turned towards her, and waving sterns, eagerly watching for the signal to be thrown into the brake.

For a few moments they were kept on the strain of expectation when a single wave of Griselda's whip hand and every hound was crashing through it, each ambitious to challenge the fox, and have the huntsman's cheer for the find.

A whimper was now heard about the middle of the brake.

'Softly,' hallooed Griselda. 'Softly, puppy! That's only a stale drag or the older hounds would have taken it up.'

Not long after, however, a fourth season hound was seen to feather his stern, and lifting his nose from the ground gave tongue to as musical a note as ever proclaimed a find, and a sure one.

'That's it,' cried the M.F.H., while the challenge was responded to by a roar from the whole body of hounds, who clustered and flew to the spot. 'That's it! Hark

to Clarionet! Hark to Clarionet! Have at him, good hound! Hoik together! hoik!

The echoing, musical cheer broke from the lips of the M.F.H., who squeezed her pony through the high and thick gorse, much to Gazelle's torture, for she could not take a step without having her thin and delicate skin pricked and lacerated by the thorns.

Through them, however, she was urged until a long 'ride' cut through the centre of the cover, presented a clear space, and then away went Gazelle at her top speed with the whole body of the hounds crashing through it, and throwing their tongues in ecstasy at being close to the driven fox.

With her neck stretched out and pulling hard to have her head, 'Be with them I will,' was pourtrayed both in the fire of her eyes and determined dash of speed, as

she galloped along the 'ride,' rough and rugged as was the turf.

'The fox was now being pushed towards a thick corner of the cover, from which it seemed certain that he must either break and run for his life or submit to the alternative of being ignominiously chopped like a coward.

'Hold hard, gentlemen,' shouted the M.F.H., holding up a hand to some of the field who were evidently resolved to be in front at the burst wherever they might be at the finish. 'Hold hard, gentlemen,' repeated she. 'Give them room. Have at him, Dauntless, Trimbush, Crafty, Vallentine,' cheered the M.F.H., as she recognised the cries of the several hounds now pressing their fox close and hard to break and run for his life.

'Gone away. Gone awa-a-ay!' hallooed a well known voice.

It was old Grumblesome's, who had quietly stumbled and shambled into a forward position in time to view the fox break cover.

At a stretch gallop Gazelle carried the M.F.H. to the end of the 'ride,' which led direct out of the gorse-brake and the first object that met her view was Bill Baxter sitting on the 'old 'oss,' with his faded and seedy velvet cap held high above his head, chanting somewhat melodiously, 'Gone away. Gone awa-a-ay!'

Each for himself the hounds flashed forward from the verge of the cover and being clear of it rushed wildly to pick up the scent and hit off the line.

'Steady!' cried the M.F.H. 'Steady there. Steady!'

To her inexpressible delight the puppy 'Growler' put his nose to the ground a few

paces to the extreme left, and then gave tongue to as musical a note as was ever thrown in wood, field, or forest.

‘That’s it, Growler!’ hallooed the M.F.H. ‘Get to him, hounds, get to him!’ It wanted no second cheer. In a compact body his companions rushed to the assistance of Growler, and the truth of his announcement being confirmed up went their heads with a roar of music, and down went their sterns, beginning to race their fox down within a few minutes of the find.

‘They will carry a head to-day,’ said the M.F.H., in a cheery voice, as she pointed with her horn reversed to the hounds streaming over a wide upland. ‘To live with them,’ continued she, ‘we must ride fast and straight or see very little of this run.’

Gazelle, however seemed resolved to see all she could and to keep first in the foremost flight. With an impetuous rush she carried her willing mistress in front of the whole field, and as they approached a double flight of stiff and strong rails, it required all Griselda's strength and skill to steady her for the leap.

'I shall not face that,' observed a horseman.

'Nor I,' rejoined another.

'We had better make for that gate,' added a third, 'and take to Featherbed Lane. He's pointing for Eastmere Earths.'

The last remark was scarcely concluded when Gazelle, being steadied for the leap, rose at the double flight of the rails, and over she flew like a bird on the wing.

It was a bold and gallant leap, and

brought forth 'Well done!' from the lips of more than one looker-on.

Glancing for a moment, as she safely landed, the M.F.H. saw that not one of the whole field followed her, and she was with the flying pack alone, in the same field with them.

It was a triumphant moment for Griselda, for she knew with what pleasure the squire would learn that she had led the field from the first, 'as it shall be,' was the inwardly expressed determination, 'to the finish.'

Without a check, the hounds swept on in full swing, and now and again a distant 'Tally-ho' proclaimed that the fox had been viewed in the line for Eastmere Earths.

Being a wide and open country, the leaps were few and far between; but, when one presented itself, both the rider and

horse had to exhibit qualifications of no mean order to accomplish it in safety.

Hounds had been running with a burning scent for nearly thirty minutes without the check of a moment, and the field began to straggle in a long, irregular line, but the M.F.H. kept her place conspicuously in front by herself, and the rest almost 'nowhere.'

Gazelle faced everything, without the remotest thought of refusing. Gate, bank, brook, hedge, and ditch, each and all came alike to her and the M.F.H.

Over or through they went, close and straight to hounds, for 'be with them we will' was their motto that day, and with them they were.

A large flock of sheep was now being driven before the hounds, huddled together by fear, and running wildly in front of the pack.

‘They must throw up now,’ said Griselda to herself, ‘and I shall have to make a forward cast.’

These words were scarcely thought—for not one was spoken—when the cry of the hounds ceased, and every tongue was mute.

It was the work of an instant only for the M.F.H. to unsheath her horn, and, urging Gazelle to make one of her best efforts, she galloped to get to the heads of the scared sheep, and effectually stopping them, blew a clear and ringing ‘come away,’ to which every hound responded by rushing at his best pace towards the spot where she stood.

‘Let your first cast be——’

‘I shall let them make their own first cast, sir,’ interrupted Griselda, somewhat irritated at the interference.

As soon as the hounds came up, they spread out in the form of a fan, each working his best to pick up the scent, and hit off the line of the fox.

Every hound, young and old, felt with his nose to the ground patiently and carefully, but certain, as it appeared, that the fox must be forward, from some inexplicable cause, not a trace of his being so could be discovered by the hounds.

‘Having done your best,’ said the M.F.H., ‘I must now try mine;’ and riding quickly down wind, with the hounds close at Gazelle’s heels, she proceeded to make the forward cast perfect in that direction, previous to making it up wind, as she knew from the practical lessons she had had from the squire, that the former was the way that foxes constantly run, when they can.

The first forward cast was almost completed without any appearance of a successful result, when a hound was seen to poke his nose among a patch of rough sedge grass on the edge of a wide ditch and began to be busy in his action. A moment more and a whimper announced that he began to believe that what was wanted had been found. Then up went his head as a deep bell-like note was thrown from his tongue, and, being taken up, away the pack streamed again on the line of the fox, still pointing for Eastmere Earths.

The horn of the M.F.H. was again in its sheath, and Gazelle once more holding the pride of place, first in the foremost flight.

The check was advantageous both to the pursuers and pursued, for the flanks of the horses heaved quickly, and the

hounds looked almost choked with the pace they had come. The fox, however, had been rattling along while they were not making a yard towards him, and this put a wide and safe distance between himself and the eager jaws ready to break him up when run into.

‘I begin to think,’ said the M.F.H., as Gazelle cleverly topped a high and steep bank, ‘that this run will not end with a kill. He is now too near some very strong earths, if he has not already reached them.’

Scarcely were the words spoken when a view holloa was heard faintly in the distance.

‘As I both thought and feared,’ remarked the M.F.H. ‘That tally-ho came from the ploughman on the ridge scarcely more

than a quarter of a mile from the Eastmere Earths.'

With his brush down, and the tag dragging upon the ground, the fox, with his back hooped, was making the last dying attempt to save his life. He could scarcely gallop, and now and again dropped into a trot, as he went down the long slope towards the earths, the cry of the hounds becoming more distinct at every stride as they approached him, beaten almost to a crawl.

From scent to view the pack rushed at him just as he reached the mouth of an open earth, but before the leading one could pull him down the sanctuary was gained, and as gallant a fox as ever stood before hounds lived, as he deserved to live, for another day.

'A clipper!' ejaculated a sportsman,

mounted on a horse with a rapidly-shaking tail. 'One of the finest runs I ever was in.'

'We only wanted a kill to make it perfect,' returned another, on a little less exhausted animal.

'That the hounds deserved their fox,' added the M.F.H., with a light crack of the thong of her whip to stop them from throwing their tongues at the mouth of the earth. 'That the hounds deserved their fox,' repeated she, 'no one can gainsay, but his death would not have improved the run in the smallest degree. Let us recollect with pleasure that a good fox gave us a good run and fairly saved his life by merit at the finish.'

Bowing right and left to the remnant of the field who had come up slowly, Griselda touched her horn, and began to retrace

her steps towards the kennels at Oakacre Court.

In the far-off distance was heard 'Come up, old 'oss.'

CHAPTER IX.

WITH a careworn, deeply-marked countenance, the squire sat one morning in the library reading a letter, that he held before him with hands which slightly trembled, and shook the paper as he seemed to be making himself master of its contents by committing every word and syllable to memory.

Over and over again John Oakacre perused that letter, judging, at least, by its length, and yet he continued to read as the furrows in his face became deeper, and

large beads of perspiration began to stand upon his forehead.

‘Dishonoured!’ at length he ejaculated, glancing with a fierce, passionate look around the room, and, crumpling up the letter in one of the palms of his hands, he flung it violently upon the floor at his feet. ‘It is the first time in my life,’ resumed he, ‘and, as far as I know or believe, the first in that of any of my name, kith or kin, that the word *dishonour* has ever been applied.’

He stooped, and, picking up the crushed letter, smoothed it out, and again commenced reading it.

‘We are instructed to inform you that your dishonoured acceptance for £2,000 having been placed in our hands——’

John Oakacre again crushed the law-

yer's letter between the palms of his hands and threw it violently from him.

‘I was promised,’ said he, ‘upon Chickabiddy’s sacred word of honour that he would provide for these bills from the sale of my shares, and yet upon the very first becoming due, which I was told by him would be met like a Bank of England note, I am charged with *dishonour*, and threatened with legal proceedings.’

He paused and drew a hand across his hot and feverish forehead.

‘Sad was the hour,’ continued he, ‘and evil the day when I was beguiled into becoming the chairman of a gold company. And yet what I was both told and shown was more than enough to tempt anyone into the undertaking, speculative as it might be deemed by the prudent. All looked fair and promising, and I knew

from his own admission that Chickabiddy's large fortune was gained entirely by ventures of this kind—fair apparently in themselves, and satisfactory to all concerned as investors of capital.'

There was now a cessation in the delivery of his thoughts, and John Oakacre bent a fixed look upon the carpet, as if reading something there not contained in the letter delivered by the post that morning.

'But, supposing,' said he, and, as he spoke, he seemed to almost gasp for breath, 'that I have been deceived by a trickster! Supposing this to be one of those bubble schemes of which I have sometimes read in the newspapers, what must be the result to me and others who have connected themselves with it through my persuasion and influence?'

The answer given by himself to his own question was anything but prompt. At length, however, he added, in a voice broken and husky with the emotion of his feelings,

‘Ruin !’

Burying his face between his hands, John Oakacre sat for a few minutes in silence, occupied with his bitter thoughts concerning the possible ruin to his friends and neighbours more than that threatened to himself.

It must have been with a noiseless footstep that Orlando Chickabiddy entered the dark and somewhat gloomy room, and there could have been no creaking of the hinges of the door, for the squire heard not a sound of the approach of anyone ; and yet, upon turning round, there sat the proprietor of Hawkhurst, within a few

feet of where he stood, with his legs stretched out and looking aggressive and defiant.

‘I was not aware that you were present,’ said the squire, in a tone and manner of unequivocal surprise.

‘I know that you were not,’ was the curt reply. ‘I know that you were not,’ repeated Orlando Chickabiddy, stretching out his legs still further, so that the heels only rested upon the floor in an independent if not elegant attitude.

‘I have had a letter——’

‘So have I,’ interrupted his visitor, ‘and not upon a very agreeable subject: your dishonoured acceptance for two thousand pounds, which I endorsed and made myself responsible for.’

‘But you religiously promised me, sir, to provide for the acceptances as they fell

due,' rejoined the squire, 'out of the sale of my shares in the gold mine.'

'Nothing possibly could be nearer to the truth,' returned Orlando Chickabiddy, in a careless tone of indifference, and deliberately folding his arms across his remarkably small and pigeon breast. 'But you cannot do otherwise, Mr. Oakacre, than agree with me, that to effect a sale it is necessary to find a buyer. Now, I do not hesitate to say that the present public animosity to the company's gold mine, so continually manifested in the columns of the daily press, absolutely forbids the possibility of the sale of a single share at any discount or at any price, however nominal.'

The squire heaved a sigh of no ordinary depth, looking almost panic-stricken.

'At the first general meeting over which

you presided a few days since, Mr. Oakacre,' resumed Orlando Chickabiddy, 'when your hounds had such a remarkably good run, you were savagely attacked by several shareholders, as the chairman of the company, in the most disgraceful manner; some of them turning round even upon me as the vendor, and accused me of not only picking the eyes out of the mine, but knowing it to be completely exhausted, sold it to the present proprietary for an exorbitant sum by gross misrepresentations and criminally fraudulent acts. I flung their accusations back, Mr. Oakacre, as you know, with the indignation of an honest man, to their very teeth—supposing they had any teeth, and, if not, to their very gums. The language used, if not, strictly speaking, bad, was violent in the extreme, and the actions accompanying it

little less objectionable. We were, in fact, bullied, Mr. Oakacre, not to say badgered, and the meeting, as the several reports in the morning and evening papers stated, broke up in the greatest disorder.'

'Greatest disorder!' exclaimed the squire. 'I never shall forget the horrid bear-garden scene of crimination and recrimination.'

'And yet it's one often repeated, Mr. Oakacre, by disappointed shareholders. Pay them a fat dividend,' said Orlando Chickabiddy, 'no matter whether out of capital or revenue, and they will praise everybody and everything; but let them have a fair, honest balance-sheet, showing nothing for division, because nothing has been made, and they are ready to commit the most atrocious acts of injustice against the chairman, the Board of Directors, and

even the poor, meek, and helpless secretary. Not a soul escapes, Mr. Oakacre, not a single soul.'

'But, from what was said,' returned the squire, 'I think that the shareholders had grave cause for complaint and censure. Every statement in the prospectus of the probability, and even certainty, of a great and almost unlimited supply of gold had been refuted by the admitted fact in the report that there was not enough to pay working expenses.'

'But that is no cause, as far as I know, Mr. Oakacre,' rejoined Orlando Chickabiddy, 'that a great change for the better in the yield of gold should not take place as soon as that did, unfortunately, for the worse. It once, sir, gave four ounces to the ton of crushed quartz.'

'That was positively denied at the

meeting,' said the squire, 'and no one rose to——'

'*I* did,' interrupted Orlando Chickabiddy, with vehemence. 'I rose on both my legs instantaneously, Mr. Oakacre, to tell the honourable proprietor that he was a confounded liar.'

'But the practical retort was not very favourable to you,' rejoined the squire, with a slight smile.

'I was certainly put down,' added Orlando Chickabiddy, with great indignation of manner, 'by a most brutal blow on the end of my nose, sir, which brought salt tears into my eyes. This, however,' continued he, 'will occupy the courts of law for a short time. I shall bring an action for damages, and depend upon a jury of my country for compensation to my injured sensibilities.'

Being satisfied with the peroration of his speech, Orlando Chickabiddy thought it was not open to improvement, and determined to say nothing more about the assault committed upon him at the general meeting.

‘As a matter of expediency, sir,’ said he, ‘I think we had better devote our attention to arrive at a sound conclusion as to what should be done to remove the pressure of the moment with regard to your dishonoured acceptance for two thousand pounds.’

‘That term *dishonour* has a terrible sound to me!’ exclaimed John Oakacre. ‘Throughout my long life, now approaching its close, it was never applied before concerning anything said or done by me.’

‘Oh, that’s nothing!’ returned Orlando Chickabiddy. ‘A dishonoured bill means

that it isn't paid, that's all—mere City bosh! Bankers, bill brokers, notaries, Jew money-lenders, lawyers, money scriveners, and chaps of that kind call a returned bill dishonoured, but there's nothing in it. All you have to do is to take it up. Pay the principal, interest, and expenses, and the dishonour won't be remembered by them very long. They want the money and care nothing about honour.'

'But if the shares cannot be sold, as you state, at any price,' rejoined the squire, 'how am I to pay?'

'I said in the present state of things, Mr. Oakacre, added Orlando Chickabiddy; 'but it's impossible that they should remain as they are. Nothing is more hopeful than a gold mine. People never despair,' continued he, 'of again finding gold where it has been already found. They think, and

often think rightly, that it is only playing a game of hide and seek. Instead of a failure as the Longitudinal Section is pronounced to be in the last report, and upon which we relied for the grand yield of four ounces to the ton of crushed quartz, and probably more, it may turn out, at any moment, as great a success as was reasonably expected when it was first opened up. Mr. Oakaere. We have only to be patient, sir, and do our best to tide over the present temporary difficulties to achieve a triumphant success in the end. *I* will take care of that,' and Orlando Chickabiddy gave a double knock upon his pigeon breast with a significance which might lead to the supposition that he held something in reserve—something up his sleeve.

‘But putting on one side the triumphant success in the end,’ responded the squire,

somewhat cynically, ‘tell me how I am to pay this *dishonoured* acceptance for two thousand pounds.’

‘It must be borrowed.’

‘How and from whom?’ asked the squire, quickly.

‘That’s a difficult question to answer,’ replied Orlando Chickabiddy, ‘unless you are on good terms with your bankers, which means that you keep a large unemployed balance in their hands, and never ask for a loan except upon unexceptionable and easily convertible securities. Should such be your enviable position, sir, I can give a prompt reply and without the hesitation of a moment.’

‘My bankers,’ rejoined the squire, ‘are in possession of the title-deeds of the whole of my property for advances to purchase shares from time to time in this company,

and being in arrear of payment of some of the interest, I cannot apply for an additional one of a single shilling. If I did,' continued he, 'I should only be humiliated by a refusal, reluctantly as it might be given.'

'Your financial position, Mr. Oakacre,' returned Orlando Chickabiddy, 'is even much worse than I suspected. You appear helpless.'

'And to whom am I indebted for this position?' said the squire, bitterly, and with anger scarcely under control.

'I should say to no one in particular,' responded Orlando Chickabiddy, in a careless tone of indifference; 'but to adverse circumstances generally. It is impossible, Mr. Oakacre, to command success in this world, however much we'—the speaker gave a single tap with the end of a forefinger upon his pigeon breast—'may de-

serve it. With the favourable indications gradually developing themselves,' continued he, 'it could not even be suspected for a single moment that the Longitudinal Section would yield, within a few days of its being opened up, nothing but barren quartz, without a single grain of gold to be found in it. Such a result was far beyond the extreme range of human foresight, Mr. Oakacre, or the undertaking would have been prudently abandoned, and our joint and several pecuniary difficulties—although of a temporary kind—would not have required all the skilful management at our command to tide over.'

A short silence now ensued, as if by mutual consent, which neither seemed disposed to break.

'With this peremptory demand for im-

mediate payment of two thousand pounds in my hand,' at length said the squire, holding the crumpled letter above his head, 'how do you suggest that I shall tide over—as you call it—the present difficulty, to say nothing of similar liabilities which must follow soon in a similar form?'

'A friend of mine would lend the amount,' replied Orlando Chickabiddy, 'if we could offer him anything in the shape of security—but, if I understand you correctly, Mr. Oakacre, the whole of your title-deeds are in pawn.'

'They are in the possession of my bankers,' rejoined the squire, getting momentarily more severe in the tone of his voice and manner, 'for money borrowed to purchase these worthless shares, sir; which I bought through your devil-

ish advice, whether intended to be good or otherwise.'

Orlando Chickabiddy sprang with great agility to his feet.

'I did not come here, Mr. Oakacre, to be insulted,' said he. 'I came here, sir, to render you all the aid in my power for tiding over a pecuniary difficulty; and this errand of mercy is met with a strong doubt cast upon the good faith of my devilish advice.'

'I was wrong, no doubt, in making the observation,' added the squire; 'but my brain seems to be on fire'—and he drew a hand across his forehead as he spoke—'and I scarcely know what I say or do.'

'In order that you may know you were wrong in making the observation, Mr. Oakacre,' returned Orlando Chickabiddy,

‘I will at once announce my readiness to lend you the two thousand pounds from my own resources. I shall have to disturb some of my securities—at a loss and great inconvenience to myself,’ continued he, ‘but I will prove to you, Mr. Oakacre, that you possess a friend in need, which, as the psalmist beautifully expresses it, is a friend indeed.’

This generous offer completely overcame the squire’s feelings, and he could only grasp Orlando Chickabiddy’s hand in silence.

CHAPTER X.

WITH a few smouldering embers flickering upon the hearth, and a dull, lurid flame occasionally springing from them to render the surrounding darkness momentarily visible, Bill Baxter and his social companion Cock Robin sat one winter's evening in the gloom of 'the kitchen, the parlour, and all,' looking in anything but the best of spirits.

After a long uninterrupted silence, which had not assisted to enliven the scene, old Grumblesome cleared his voice

from every effect of huskiness, and thus began,

‘What will you have to drink, Cocky?’

His social companion dived both hands to the extreme depths of his trowser pockets to give time, probably, for returning an appropriate answer and in accordance with the present circumstances of the case.

‘What will I have to drink?’ slowly repeated he. ‘Well, suppose I was to ask what *can* I have to drink before coming to a final decision as to what I *will* have to drink. Won’t that be a safe movement on my part, Bill Baxter?’

‘Nothing could be safer,’ rejoined old Grumblesome. ‘In fact,’ continued he, ‘it’s having a look before you leap, which I always did and do, and, therefore, never

jumped much in the whole course of my whipper-in life.'

'I never saw you take a leap, not over a water furrow even,' observed Cock Robin, 'or sheep's hurdle.'

'That's because you were looking the other way when I cleared the six foot brick wall, coped with glass bottles on the old 'oss,' responded Bill Baxter. 'It was a bold and grand leap,' said he, swaying his head from side to side, 'and I think I see myself doing it now: but I never tried it twice, Cocky, and to have seen me do it once you must have had your eyes in the right direction.'

'Ha!' exclaimed his social companion, 'I daresay I must.'

'But harking back to what we were talking about,' returned old Grumblesome, 'I say with you, Cocky, first learn what

you *can* have in this world before saying what you *will* have. I admire the sentiment. Let's drink to it.'

'In what?' asked Cock Robin, 'I'm rather particular at this time of day.'

'It's no use, I suppose, recommending a cup of good strong tea?' said Bill Baxter, interrogatively. 'The water just begins to bile, I see.'

Cock Robin deigned to give no reply to this question; but maintained a rigid and frigid silence.

'As tea won't do, I see,' continued old Grumblesome, 'I'd better think of something that is more likely to do. Now it so happens that a particular friend of mine many a long year ago said to me, "Bill Baxter, always keep a bottle or two—for two are better than one—of choice old Scotch whisky in the cupboard as medical

comforts, and there is no finer than that brewed at the top of Ben Nevis.'

'I never heard of whisky being brewed on the top of Ben Nevis?' responded his social companion, beginning to take a little interest in the conversation.

'Ignorance may be bliss, Cocky, in many respects,' rejoined Bill Baxter, 'but not in want of knowing all about Ben Nevis whisky. It's brewed from the dew of the mountain itself, not only on the top in the early morning before sunrise, but a good deal of it is drunk there on the very spot long before sunset.'

'I should like to taste a drop or two of that mixture,' returned his social companion, smacking his lips.

'The particular friend of mine,' added old Grumblesome, 'said it was to be kept as medical comforts, and I've managed to

keep one bottle a long time by shutting my eyes when going to the cupboard, and looking another way to where it stood.'

'You have one left, then?' remarked Cock Robin.

'For medical comforts,' replied Bill Baxter, with a sly look out of the corners of his eyes at his social companion.

'Let's have the medical comforts now, then,' rejoined Cock Robin, 'for no one wants comforting more than I do in the whole county.'

'In that case,' returned Bill Baxter, 'I think we may be justified in drawing the cork of the one bottle of Ben Nevis;' and thus speaking, he rose from his chair, and, going to the cupboard in the corner of 'the kitchen and parlour and all,' brought forth, as was alleged, the pure, unblended dew of the mountain.

Placing it upon the table, with two glasses and spoons, and a brown paper bag containing a liberal supply of loaf sugar, old Grumblesome pointed to the little kettle of boiling water hissing and spluttering upon the adjacent fire, and said,

‘Help yourself, Cocky, if your conscience doesn’t smite ye.’

‘Why should it smite me?’ inquired his social companion, placing the bottle to his nose and inhaling the aroma of Ben Nevis.

‘For medical comforts only, as a special caution from my best of friends,’ responded Bill Baxter. ‘I’ll leave it to you and your conscience to settle the matter. But it may be as well to remind you, Cocky, that, having become one of the blessed, you will perhaps hear a voice presently

from the silent tomb. I mention this before you mix a single drop of Ben Nevis as a sort of friendly warning against sin and temptation.'

'It's very kind and neighbourly of you, Bill,' returned his social companion, 'and I can't be too thankful for your giving me the chance of keeping out of trouble; but I'll risk it this once, and for a small sum wouldn't object to make it a certainty.'

'Under present circumstances, then,' added Bill Baxter, 'we'll say no more upon the subject of the silent tomb. Mix your liquor.'

Cock Robin proceeded forthwith to carry out the injunction, and evidence was soon forthcoming that the 'blend' was quite to his taste.

'Ben Nevis and I are upon the best of terms,' said he, at the end of a most copi-

ous sip. 'We are sworn friends from this moment, henceforth, and for ever. Let anyone say one word against Ben Nevis,' continued he, 'and I'll let him have a drive straight from the shoulder, which he'll be sure to remember once in twenty-four hours all the year round.'

'I thought you only wanted to know one another to become good friends,' rejoined old Grumblesome, with one of his best of good humoured smiles. 'Ben Nevis and I have been intimate for many a long year.'

'To our better and longer acquaintance-ship, Ben Nevis!' said Cock Robin, raising his glass and decreasing a fair moiety of its contents.

'I thought you'd only have to know one another for a few short minutes,' rejoined Bill Baxter, 'to become the best of

friends. I look upon Ben Nevis as a noble institution.'

'So do I,' returned his social companion, 'if a noble institution means rare good liquor.'

The definition, perhaps, might be accepted as synonymous, for the discussion upon the point terminated here, and their attention in mute silence was concentrated in practically testing the 'medical comforts of Ben Nevis.'

After a prolonged interval devoted to this special purpose, Cock Robin inquired, 'If the squire had been to the kennels that morning?'

'Yes,' replied old Grumblesome, with a melancholy shake of the head. 'The kennel bell was pulled, as the clock struck the hour at which he has come on non-hunting days for the last thirty years and

more, and what is left of the squire walked into the court.'

'What do you mean?' asked his social companion.

'Just what I say,' responded Bill Baxter, with a repetition of the demonstrative shake of the head. 'His remains walked in.'

'You mean that he has grown so much like a skeleton of late?'

'I do,' added Bill Baxter, with the utmost depression of spirits expressed in his tone and manner. 'The old squire,' continued he, 'who looked so well and jolly last season, and who never rode straighter to hounds in his life, has become drawn as fine as needle wire, and ten years added to his age in the time if counted by his looks.'

'There's something wrong with him no

doubt,' remarked Cock Robin. 'A screw loose somewhere.'

Bill Baxter gave a deep drawn sigh, and then had recourse to Ben Nevis for temporary relief from the weight of care.

'I'm better now, Cocky,' said he, in a thick, shaky voice, 'through medical comforts; but I could have cried like a pinched babby when you mentioned the screw being loose with the squire. I could indeed. To see him this morning in the kennels,' continued he, 'was enough to break a common Christian's heart, and I'm only a common Christian, Cocky. I'm not one of those boiled down, stiff-backed, whalebone lined, steel hardened, tough skinned old growlers, who go round about the country, preaching no end about the sins of their neighbours, without remembering their own. I try to think at the

end of every day's work, before putting my head upon the pillow, what I have done, and what I ought to have done, and whether done or left undone there's anything to be done or left undone to make myself more like a saint than a sinner, as day by day, and night by night, I am slowly, perhaps, but surely being run to earth. At the same time put me down only as a common Christian, Cocky.'

'I tell you what it is, Bill Baxter,' rejoined his social companion, 'you, like some of our parsons, give us too much of the same thing in your sermons. I thought you never would have done with "left undone and done." Come, leave off preaching, and tell us more about the squire, as you saw him this morning.'

'His remains,' returned Bill Baxter—
'for there's not much left of him—came

to the kennel-door just in the nick of time, as the clock struck the hour, and as the squire walked into the court, he looked more like a ghost than belonging to this world, so pale, thin, and noteless he appeared.

“Give me my frock,” said he, and, if my ears did not deceive me, added—without intending I should hear him—“perhaps for the last time of wearing it.”

Cock Robin gave a convulsive start at these words, and, placing his elbows upon the table, leant forward, with his face between his hands, in an attitude of the most profound attention.

‘Do you think he meant what he said?’ asked he.

‘He looked so,’ responded Bill Baxter, ‘and he seldom says anything he doesn’t mean.’

‘And what followed?’ inquired his social companion, with his face still looming between his hands.

‘I asked him how he would have the hounds drafted,’ returned Bill Baxter, ‘although I well knew what his answer would be, from more than thirty long years’ experience.

“The young entry first,” said he, “and each hound singly.”

‘Now, it so happened that, seeing the couple of puppies, Growler and Grumble, in front, on the bench in the lodging-room, I called them first, and out they came with a rush, their ears thrown back, and their sterns waving like playful beauties, as they are. Taking a biscuit from his pocket, he broke it in pieces, and throwing a bit to each, said,

“They are a couple of as promising

puppies as I ever saw, and both worked well, I hear, in that run of the season, when my first whip carried the horn of the M.F.H."

"They did, sir," I replied, "about the best I ever saw for first season hounds."

"That only shows what the walk will do," he said; "for a better one not a foxhound bred, young or old, ever had."

"As he spoke nothing more, I waited for a few minutes, and then asked, "if I should go on drafting the hounds?"

"No," he replied, "not this morning. I'm not well enough to stand longer on the flags;" and as he spoke, he turned slowly towards the kennel-door.

"I opened it for him; and as he went out, he left, as I thought, with a look—the speaker paused before completing the

sentence—‘as if he knew he should never enter it again.’

‘If that be so,’ responded his social companion, removing his hands and presenting a front and full view of his rubicund visage, ‘if he gives up hunting the country there’ll be a mighty change in these parts.’

‘A mighty change!’ repeated Bill Baxter. ‘There’s not a living man in the whole county to fill his place. Our squire, you must recollect, is the last of the Oak-acres, an old family that dates further back than anyone can tell of, and the head of it has always been a first-class sportsman, and a master of fox-hounds. Think of a strain of blood like that, Cocky, and then tell me who is to fill his empty saddle?’

‘But don’t tell me he’s going to give up

hunting the country,' whined Cock Robin, with tears rising to flood his eyelids. 'It will break my heart.'

'If what I both hear and see are true,' replied Bill Baxter, letting his voice drop to almost an inaudible whisper, 'the poor old squire *must*.'

'Why?' sharply inquired his social companion.

'His money is—' and then Bill Baxter conveyed the meaning of the conclusion of the sentence by giving a vigorous puff at the end of his fingers.

'Gone?' added Cock Robin.

'Lost,' responded Bill Baxter, 'to the last guinea in the gold mine.'

A dull and gloomy silence succeeded. Neither spoke one word for several minutes, and Ben Nevis, or what remained of the medical comforts,' seemed to be forgotten.

As if scarcely master of his own movements, Cock Robin rose from his chair and clutching his friend's hand, held out mechanically for him to take, quitted the 'kitchen and parlour and all' like a man in a dream, to retrace his footsteps homewards through the black darkness of the winter's night.

CHAPTER XI.

IN the daytime, when the sun was up, if not always visible, the ancient Middle Temple gate was thrown back upon its hinges and stood wide open for the wayfarer to pass in or out as his business might demand or the urgency of the case require.

Upon the shadows of night falling around, the ancient Middle Temple gate was securely closed, and a summons had to be given to the guardian keeping ward and watch, before entrance or exit could be made or effected.

Now it may be stated as an unquestionable fact beyond dispute that Edward Slomax seldom disturbed the janitor of the ancient Middle Temple gate from his first sleep and still less from his second ; but exceptions to the best of rules will arise and creep in, despite of the firmest resolutions to prevent them, and Edward Slomax, in giving a double knock for it to be opened long hours after it had been closed in accordance with the rules and imperative orders of the benchers of the Middle Temple, proved to demonstration that even a model student might be late. It was not often that he was late, as Mrs. Chell would have averred with the utmost solemnity, and the night porter could testify upon his oath if called upon, especially if accompanied with the small

fee of one shilling, for the night porter knew the value of money, if not an absolute worshipper of mammon.

In order that the model student's reputation may not suffer temporarily even in thought, it may be advisable, perhaps, to divulge the cause of his falling under the charge of being late, previous to climbing the dark, twisting, twining staircase which led to Mrs. Chell's chambers, now occupied in part by himself.

Forming one of a small party of 'choice spirits' from Cambridge, he had been to Putney, and from thence to Mortlake, to be a spectator of the university boat-race, which had been appointed to be rowed that very day at high water mark. To the inexpressible satisfaction of the Cambridge men, popularly designated as the 'Light Blues,' and to an equal degree of

mortification on the part of the Oxford men, commonly described as the 'Dark Blues,' the Cambridge boat was declared to be the winner by a clear length.

Having been stroke-oar in the victorious Cambridge eight well within the memory of almost the youngest undergraduate present, Edward Slomax found himself surrounded, hemmed in, and captured by a shouting crowd of enthusiasts, who, associating him with the present triumph in some exclusive way of their own, insisted upon slapping him between the shoulders in a patronising kind of way, and shaking his hands with so much fervour that the ends of his fingers tingled from the force.

All this, however, was submitted to with exemplary patience and undisturbed good-humour, and the somewhat rough usage

from friendly hands borne in a most friendly spirit.

It seems almost needless to add that the object of this popular demonstration was one of the honoured guests at the dinner given with unexceptional regularity upon the day of the decision of the match, and to this cause must be assigned the lateness of the hour that Edward Slomax returned to disturb from his dreams the night-porter of the Middle Temple gate.

When wide awake, as he could quickly be from long habit, however deep and profound his slumber, the night-porter, upon admitting the model student, expressed 'his happiness as having arrived at the highest pinnacle in this world upon learning that Cambridge had won again.'

The night-porter knew almost instinc-

tively that a coin of the value of half-a-crown of the lawful money of Great Britain was now in the palm of one of his hands. It felt to the touch as a half-crown should feel, and nothing smaller.

‘Had he hailed from Oxford,’ observed the night-porter, pocketing the half-crown, ‘I should have said something quite different to that. Suit what you have to say to those to whom it has to be said. Praise Cambridge when Cambridge wins, pity Oxford when Oxford loses. That’s my rule, because it pays,’ and, jingling the half-crown with a bunch of keys at the bottom of his pocket, he re-entered his watch-box, and quickly became unconscious of all belonging to Cambridge triumphs and Oxford defeats.

In climbing the twisting, twining, dark staircase leading to his dormitory, the

model student made a few noisy stumbles, slips, and blunders, and Mrs. Chell distinctly heard them.

‘Mr. Slomax is late to-night,’ she remarked, with her nose slightly elevated from between the bed-clothes, in order to obtain increased power of hearing. ‘Mr. Slomax is late to-night,’ repeated she, ‘and all on account of this rowing business. I wish the grads and the undergrads, as they are called, would let him alone, and keep more away from his rooms than they have done of late. Less cigars would be smoked, and less empty wine-bottles carried off by the waiter at “The Rainbow” every morning, when they come up for the University match. I don’t like the ways, customs, or manners of these grads,’ continued Mrs. Chell, ‘or the undergrads either.’

The model student's boots might have been obstinate, and resisted every mild attempt to disengage his feet from them; but Mrs. Chell became sensible that unusual violence must have succeeded it from the clattering bang with which they were kicked or hurled against the adjacent wainscot.

‘Mr. Slomax is late to-night,’ reiterated Mrs. Chell; and she would have shaken her head, more in sorrow than in anger, but its present position on the pillow was not adapted for the movement.

The model student was not popularly known as a vocalist, and, therefore, commencing a song in a powerful, if not melodious, voice afforded a further proof to Mrs. Chell's mind that the effects were consistent with the advanced hour of the night and the University boat race.

‘ “ Did you ne’er hear of a jolly young waterman
Who at Blackfriars’ Bridge used for to ply.” ’

‘ I much wish, Mr. Slomax, that you had never heard of him,’ added Mrs. Chell, slightly irritated at the disturbance to her peaceful and refreshing sleep.

‘ “ He feathered his oar with such skill and dexterity ;
Charming each heart and delighting each eye.” ’

A sudden and abrupt check took place, and the refrain terminated from necessity. Imperfect both in the words and music, rendering the attempt abortive in the extreme, the model student at once ceased to render himself disagreeable, and night hideous, to Mrs. Chell, whose last audible words, muffled beneath the blankets, were ‘ Mr. Slomax is late to-night.’

Late, however, as he might have been, he was up at the usual hour, and ready

for the substantial breakfast invariably provided by his landlady with the utmost punctuality.

Upon the snow-white table-cloth, spread smoothly upon the round table placed within comfortable distance from the fire, so as neither to scorch his legs nor chill them, a rasher cut from a mild Suffolk ham, and broiled to a nicety, appeared when a bright and polished little cover was lifted from the dish in which it lay invitingly to be eaten while it was hot and fizzing. A couple of new-laid eggs, commanding the high price of twopence each at this time of year, were in the background, flanked by a hot roll and a small brown loaf, brought up the immediate rear, with the addition of a large bunch of watercresses, which looked almost too green and fresh to be really devoid of

artificial aid. Surmounting a small basin of boiling water a toasted muffin might be seen, and as an ornament only, it may rationally be supposed, a swan moulded in butter and garnished with parsley completed Mrs. Chell's supply for the model student's ordinary breakfast, objectionably late as he had been the previous night.

‘Shall I pour out the tea, sir?’ inquired Mrs. Chell. ‘It has been standing long enough to be strong and good.’

‘If you please, Jenny,’ replied he. ‘I feel to require a cup of tea more than usual this morning.’

Mrs. Chell closed her eyes and shook her head gravely, but said nothing.

The shake of the head, however, was not lost upon Edward Slomax.

‘I was late, Jenny,’ observed he, making short work of the two new-laid eggs, pre-

ceded by the total disappearance of the rasher cut from the mild Suffolk ham—‘I was late, Jenny,’ repeated he, commencing an attack upon the muffin, ‘and, I fear, disturbed you.’

Mrs. Chell still kept her eyes closed, but discontinued shaking her head, as it gave her a tendency to giddiness.

‘Had you been a little less violent with your boots, Mr. Slomax,’ responded she, ‘and postponed singing that very loud song until after dinner, instead of several hours before breakfast, there would not have been much cause for complaint, under the circumstances of its being the day of the boat-race ; but altogether there was too much noise and too little harmony to enchant one’s ear, sir, if I’m any judge of music, as the late lamented Chell declared I was upon several occasions.’

‘Say not another word about it, Jenny,’ rejoined the model student, making a perfect finish of the watercresses, as the last green leaf of the bunch dipped in salt vanished. ‘Say not another word about it, Jenny,’ repeated he. ‘It will not occur again until next year, which is a long interval for unbroken sleep and undisturbed rest. Give me another cup of tea, Jenny, and prepare to pack up my travelling-bag, for I’m off within three hours hence to Forester’s Lodge, Hampshire.’

‘To see your most lovable of aunts?’ returned Mrs. Chell.

‘And my most adorable of cousins,’ added Edward Slomax, with great emphasis upon the ‘adorable.’

‘Ah!’ ejaculated Mrs. Chell, ‘if I had been a man, instead of the opposite sex, and loved my cousin as you, Mr. Slomax,

did, and I believe do, she would have been mine, and not another's, sir. No, Mr. Slomax, she would have been mine, and not another's.'

'So you have told me dozens of times, Jenny,' responded he, 'and almost in the same words. But with nothing in this world, and not knowing when, if ever, I shall have anything, how could I think for a moment of making a girl like my cousin, who has never known what a want means, my wife?'

'Your cousin, Mr. Slomax,' replied she, 'would only have had to run the risk of ninety-nine women out of every hundred, let them be born ladies or not. Things may look certainties for a good many,' continued Mrs. Chell, 'before they marry, and when they marry, and all looks as if no harm could come to them; but their

lives tell a different tale. The certainties too often prove worse than uncertainties, and poverty and ruin mark the spot where the secured fortune was thought to be out of the reach of danger. Let a woman's husband be a man, I say, capable and willing to work and face the troubles of life with a brave heart, never knowing what to be beaten is. A woman with such a husband as that, Mr. Slomax, need never fear. Riches may melt away, and money become too short to be pleasant for housekeeping purposes ; but all will come right in the end, sir, she may depend upon it. There's more confidence to be placed in a husband who says to his wife, "I'll do my best, put your trust in me," than in all the money-grubbers that were ever born. Give me pluck, Mr. Slomax, in man or

woman, above every other quality in this world.'

'That sounds like tinkling cymbals from your lips, Jenny,' replied the model student, 'and I thoroughly understand the kindness of your flattering speech. But,' and he shook his head mournfully, 'it wouldn't do, Jenny. It wouldn't indeed!'

'If I were a man——'

'But, then, you are not a man, Jenny, and therefore it's useless to dwell upon that subject. I repeat, Jenny, that you are not a man,' said he, 'but, probably, if you were you would adopt the example set by the majority of men, and do as they do, which too often is just the opposite of what they ought to do.'

'It's not too late, Mr. Slomax, to cut him out,' rejoined Mrs. Chell. 'A little whipper-snapper of a fellow with the name of

Chickabiddy can't be worthy of such a girl as your cousin for a wife. Cut him out, Mr. Slomax, cut him out, sir.'

'It's all settled, Jenny,' returned he, with a groan. 'The letter received this morning from my most lovable of aunts, contains the awful and hideous announcement that the marriage is——' a second groan of much greater force prevented the completion of the sentence.

'Cut him out, Mr. Slomax,' added Mrs. Chell. 'Buckle up your loins, sir, and cut him out.'

'The settlement, Jenny,' said he, 'is signed, sealed, and delivered. How am I, then, to cut him out?'

'It's not too late, Mr. Slomax,' responded she, 'until the ring is upon the finger. When the ring is upon

the finger, and over the second joint,' continued Mrs. Chell, 'I should recommend, sir, no further attempt being made to cut him out; but certainly not until then.'

'Go, Jenny, and pack my travelling-bag,' he rejoined, with a sigh to which there could scarcely be a lower depth. 'I'm the most miserable man that ever put his hat on to go out of the Middle Temple gate, and religiously believe that I shall be more so when I enter it again.'

'It's your own fault if you are,' returned Mrs. Chell. 'There is still time, and so I say cut him out. If I were a man——'

'I have before called your attention, Jenny, to the simple fact that you are not a man,' added he, irritably, 'and never will

be a man, and therefore let the subject be dropped at once and for ever.'

With this reproof, Mrs. Chell in silence retired to pack the travelling-bag.

CHAPTER XII.

TOM TIDY still continued to call at Forester's Lodge once during the week, notwithstanding his lectures upon natural history had been discontinued with the teaching of several of the professors of the arts and sciences who had attended with equal regularity to render his pupil proficient in their several accomplishments.

The village apothecary now and again came to ascertain the condition and health of Miss Penelope Peepem, and to rectify

any irregularity of the system which might possibly be discovered, this being the sole object of his frequent visits.

In the ordinary course, and in the ordinary way, Tom Tidy's arrival had been announced by Cock Robin, and his patient of indefinite long standing was promptly ready to receive him with her accustomed elegant and graceful deportment.

As the apothecary entered the reception-room, he bowed his best, and with the point of his nose quite as near the ground as usual.

Miss Penelope Peepem curtsied low, but held a lower curtsey in reserve.

'I hope that we are in our usual state of uniform salubrity,' said Tom Tidy, smiling, as he pressed the ends of two fingers upon her wrist, and glanced at a thick silver watch held in his hand

to count the normal beatings of her pulse.

Miss Penelope entertained an idea that she was, but was not quite sure.

‘How are your bools?’ inquired he, in a confidential whisper.

With a modest, downcast look upon the floor, she replied that she thought they were exceedingly correct.

‘In that case,’ returned he, ‘we must do our best to keep them correct. A pill at night and draught in the morning, my dear madam, I have no doubt will meet the exigencies of the case.’

His patient fully coincided in this suggested treatment, and promised to take the pill and draught, with the regularity of many long years by way of a precedent.

‘It’s the system of all others to be adopt-

ed, my dear madam,' returned Tom Tidy, 'as I have before stated. If well take the best means at your command of continuing well. If unwell, or a little off colour, to apply the expressive language of an eminent physician of the present day, take your medical man's advice and physic—but above all his physic—and wait with combined hope and patience for improvement and progress, however slow, towards convalescence.'

'Most excellent advice,' added Miss Penelope Peepem, emphatically, 'and which I shall most decidedly follow. Send the weekly pill and draught as usual, and they shall meet with the utmost attention they deserve at my hands.'

Interpreting this as a compliment to his professional skill, Tom Tidy bowed his best, which means his lowest, making a

successful dive at the calves of his legs with the end of his nose.

This was met with a corresponding drop on the part of Miss Penelope Peepem, who, with infinite grace, swept gradually downwards until a very limited space intervened between herself and the carpet.

Tom Tidy's essence of politeness met with its match in Miss Penelope Peepem's elegance of deportment, and the balance may be said to have been about equal between them.

At this moment the clattering of horses' feet was heard and from the window of the reception-room might be seen the near approach of Griselda mounted on Gazelle and Orlando Chickabiddy riding by her side.

'My niece and her cavalier!' exclaimed Miss Penelope Peepem, clasping her hands

together in admiration of what she saw. 'They really look superb, Mr. Tidy, and seem as if made expressly for each other!'

Whatever the apothecary's opinion might have been upon this point will never be known, for it was not conveyed either by word, look, or gesture.

Upon arriving at the door where Cock Robin stood ready to attend to the dismounting of his mistress, and take the reins from her hand, Griselda showed her independence of all help by slipping from the saddle lightly and hurrying into the house.

Orlando Chickabiddy promptly found to his trembling fears that he was not so independent of all help.

'W-o-o !' exclaimed he, as his steed—alleged by Griselda to possess more of the symmetrical points of a camel

than those of a horse—began to fret and chafe upon the bit. ‘Wo-o-o!’ repeated he, in a state of nervous agitation. ‘Be quiet, I say, and let me get off.’

‘Can I help you, sir?’ asked Cock Robin, with the spirit of mischief twinkling in his eyes.

‘Good young man, I shall feel much obliged if you will,’ replied Orlando Chickabiddy, clutching the pommel of the saddle with one hand and tugging hard at the reins with the other. ‘I shall feel much obliged, good young man, if you will,’ repeated he, ‘for my seat is anything but safe, and I earnestly want to get off.’

‘Wait a-bit, sir,’ rejoined Cock Robin, ‘and I’ll manage it for ye,’ at the same time leading Gazelle away from the capering and dancing steed towards her stable door.

This, however, proved anything but a judicious step, for no sooner were the two separated by a few paces than Orlando Chickabiddy's capering steed began to rear and plunge most violently, rendering his seat conspicuously unsafe if the effect at the moment might be relied upon; as a matter of fact there being a wide space every now and then between himself and the saddle. 'I shall be off,' shouted he, clasping his arms round the neck of the unruly animal while his hat was jerked from his head and rolled upon the ground. 'I shall be off,' shouted he, at the extreme pitch of his voice, which sounded not dissimilar to a scream. 'Good young man, save me!'

'All right, sir,' rejoined Cock Robin, with perfectly undisturbed coolness of demeanour, as he again turned Gazelle and

led her to the head of the dancing and prancing steed who, being restored to her companionship, instantly became quiet and devoid of all tendency to restiveness. "All right, sir," repeated he. "Let me help you down, sir," and laying hold of one of Mr. Chickabiddy's legs instructed him to throw the other over on the same side, so as to ease him gently down upon his shoulders, and thus enable him to alight upon the ground perpendicularly instead of a more hazardous and less dignified position.

Acting under these express injunctions, Orlando Chickabiddy descended from his perilous situation with his arms transferred from the neck of his horse to that of Cock Robin, who in a cheery voice said,

"There, sir, I said it would be all right, and all right it is !"

‘Good young man, as I addressed you upon a former head downwards position in which you most miraculously discovered me,’ responded Orlando Chickabiddy, with commendable warmth, ‘you shall have an ample reward for this second noble act of devotion. You will find yourself remembered in my codicil.’

Cock Robin lifted a straightened forefinger respectfully to his forehead; but thought that a small donation on the spot might have been more certain and, therefore, preferable.

‘My dear Mr. Chickabiddy, I am quite prepared to faint at what I have beheld from an upstairs window; but thank heaven the threatened catastrophe has been mercifully avoided!’ and there stood Miss Penelope Peepem panting for want

of breath and looking perfectly bewildered with terror.

‘I fear,’ continued she, ‘that I shall never get over this shock to my nervous system; but my medical man happens to be here, and he will prescribe a remedy should a remedy be possible.’

‘It seems to me, Miss Penelope Peepem, if I may judge from my own acute feelings,’ rejoined Orlando Chickabiddy, ‘that I have narrowly escaped the jaws of death.’

‘Let me offer you my most sincere congratulations,’ returned she, ‘and at the same time recommend that my medical man should feel your pulse and prepare for the worst symptoms of hysteria which probably may closely follow so terrible a cause of disturbance to the nervous system.’

The presence of Tom Tidy now became prominent as an actor in the scene.

‘If there is anything I can do to relieve your sufferings, sir,’ said he, beginning to feel without further introduction Orlando Chickabiddy’s pulse, ‘you have only to command my services. Hysteria,’ continued he, ‘is not restricted only to the shedding of tears in a kind of convulsion or spasm, but it may take a totally opposite form in uncontrolled bursts of laughter and apparent merriment, however unreal or devoid of foundation they may be. Take my arm, sir, and lean on me as we return to the house.’

‘At the present moment I hear somebody laughing unusually loud,’ observed Orlando Chickabiddy, having his natural suspicions awakened that ‘somebody’s’

risible muscles were being exercised, probably, at the expense of his personal dignity.

‘It’s Miss Griselda in a fit of hysteria,’ responded Tom Tidy, with a somewhat unscrupulous design of making things pleasant. ‘It commenced in my presence when upstairs, and I hear that it is not quite abated. She was seized, Mr. Chickabiddy, in beholding from the window the imminent danger in which you were placed, and your happy escape has produced, doubtlessly, an abnormal repetition.’

Orlando Chickabiddy received the explanation in silence, as he crept slowly towards the house in an exhausted state, leaning on the apothecary’s arm, but his mind was not altogether free from doubt as to the real cause of Griselda’s hilarity,

pronounced to be 'hysteria' by a duly qualified licentiate of Apothecary's Hall.

'I'll go to my niece a little in advance,' said Miss Penelope Peepem, 'and see what can be done to mitigate the evil of this sudden and terrible shock to her nervous system,' and hurrying away she left Orlando Chickabiddy under the tender care of Tom Tidy, who gently conducted him towards the ivy-covered entrance of Forester's Lodge.

CHAPTER XIII.

It became widely known through the weekly gossip at the market dinner-table, and the countless sources from whence rumour gathers her news, tales, and scandal, and stories of endless variety and want of truth, that Squire Oakacre's last season as M.F.H. had arrived, and at the close his limited stud of weight-carrying hunters would be sold without reserve, together with the unrivalled pack of foxhounds which had been kenneled in the vicinity of Oakacre Court—generation after generation—for centuries.

Various were the causes assigned for this unexpected step on the part of the squire. Some said he was growing too old to hunt the hounds himself, and that he would never consent for anyone to take his place. Others thought that his health was failing, and that he had no longer the strength to blow hounds out of cover, and be with them from the find to the finish as he had done time out of mind. There were those, however, who, being better acquainted with the surrounding circumstances of the case, came to the correct and final conclusion that Squire Oakacre was about giving up his popular position in the county as M.F.H. because he no longer possessed the means of maintaining it.

‘His money is gone,’ observed Tom Brown, the yeoman, whose pride was to

have a litter of cubs in the Home Wood season after season. 'In trying to get a bit more gold,' continued he, 'as many a man has done before him, and will do again, he's lost all he had, I'm told, and now the hounds and hunters are to be sold, and the establishment broken up. It will be a nice state of things in this part of the county presently, and the sooner I give notice to quit the better, as I certainly will do next Michaelmas.'

Tom Brown's anticipation was soon followed by the public announcement of the unwelcome fact. Advertisements appeared in the local newspapers, and the walls and gate-posts for miles around were placarded conspicuously with the particulars of the forthcoming sale of the Oakacre hounds and hunters,

'John Oakacre, Esq., having decided to

resign the mastership and cease hunting the country.'

No further explanation was rendered for his retirement, neither was it necessary that it should be. It became generally and particularly known that on a certain fixed day and hour the sale by auction was to take place at Oakacre Court, and numbers from all distances, long, short, and close at hand, were resolved to be present at the separation of the old pack and stud for ever from its precincts.

In the large square stable-yard adjoining, surrounded by well-ventilated buildings, containing stalls and boxes for the few but choice horses, a waggon was placed as a convenient rostrum for the auctioneer, who, punctually to the time for the commencement of the sale, presented himself in full view of the assembly, and announced

in a cheerful voice and manner that ‘the honour had been conferred upon him of being instructed to sell without reserve the well-known pack of Oakacre foxhounds, and the small but highly valuable stud of hunters, with which few sportsmen in the whole county of Hampshire were not familiar. ‘It was to be a genuine sale,’ continued he, ‘for every horse and hound was to be sold for whatever they would fetch. He need not dwell upon the pedigree of the old Oakacre blood. No better could be found, it will be admitted, in all England, the greatest attention having been paid to the strain by the squire himself. Possessing unrivalled pace, a fox has to fly before them as soon as found, and yet, when it comes to slow hunting, or picking the scent over a cold fallow, down go their noses, and inch by inch

they work it through. He might speak for a month about what they can do and what they have done, but the masks and pads to be seen on the kennel door are the best proofs of the account they give of the foxes they run. He would not unnecessarily waste more time in his preliminary remarks, but proceed at once to offer Lot No. 1, a couple of first season puppies called Grumble and Growler.'

Bill Baxter, looking as if ten years had been added to his age within less than as many weeks, led them into the centre of a circle formed by the motley group, and kept his eye fixed in silence upon the forms of Grumble and Growler.

'Lot number one,' shouted the auctioneer, 'a couple of first season hounds, called Grumble and Growler. What will

any gentleman please to give for them? Recollect, they are to be sold.'

'I beg your pardon, sir,' said a voice, 'but I suppose a lady may bid as well as a gentleman?'

'Certainly,' replied the auctioneer. 'There's no law, as far as I know, to prevent a lady from buying a couple of foxhounds. She may want them for lap-dogs. Put them up. What shall we say, fifteen guineas?'

'They're worth twenty,' remarked Tom Brown, the yeoman.

'Twenty guineas are bid for a matchless couple of first season puppies,' cried the auctioneer. 'Any advance upon twenty guineas?'

'Not for me, Mr. Knockemdown,' replied Tom Brown, the yeoman, with firmness of purpose depicted in his compressed

lips and knitted brow. 'What I said was, they were worth twenty guineas, not that I would give twenty guineas for 'em.'

'A mistake on my part,' rejoined the auctioneer. 'No matter. Put them up at a price. What does the lady bid for Grumble and Growler?'

'A tenner,' was the reply; and it was given by Griselda's commissioner, Cock Robin, who occupied a place on the outside of the ring of spectators.

'Which means the lady's bid for Grumble and Growler is ten pounds,' rejoined the auctioneer. 'Going,' continued he, lifting his hammer. 'Going. Any more? Going.'

'You may as well say gone, Mr. Knockemdown,' returned Tom Brown. 'No one here will bid against the squire's first

whip. She's too good a sportsman, and too much to the front for anyone in these parts to oppose her.'

'Any more?' repeated the auctioneer. 'Going.' He paused for a moment, with his hammer raised; and then added, as he brought it down sharply upon a small deal table, placed as a kind of desk in the waggon, 'Gone!'

The auctioneer, busy in his calling, recorded the price at which Grumble and Growler had been sold, and then asked who was the purchaser.

'Miss Grizzle Peepem, sir, of Forester's Lodge,' replied Cock Robin, raising his voice, so as to be heard distinctly by everyone present, 'is the sporting lady that's bought these hounds, and I've got her money in my pocket, to pay for 'em. Say the word, and out it comes.'

‘Very good,’ rejoined the auctioneer, making a memorandum of the name and address. ‘We will settle about that presently. Now for the next lot, number two, Crafty and Vanity, a couple of fourth season, badger-pied bitches, the leaders and pride of the pack. Bring them forward, to be looked at, for they will bear a good deal of gape-seed, without hanging their heads.’

As if regarding it as one of his special missions, Bill Baxter led into the middle of the ring the pride of the pack, Crafty and Vanity, linked together in couples.

‘There, gentlemen,’ said the auctioneer, ‘are the acknowledged two best hounds that ever threw tongue, with a pedigree dating as far back as William the Conqueror.’

Tom Brown, the yeoman, thought an

opportunity presented itself here for indulging in a hearty laugh, and took advantage of it.

‘You may laugh, sir, if you please,’ remarked the auctioneer, seriously. ‘A man may laugh, I believe, in these days without running the risk of being hanged, drawn, or quartered. But it is a tradition in this county that the ancestors of Crafty and Vanity were owned by William the Conqueror when he hunted the stag in the New Forest. It’s not an uncommon thing,’ continued he, ‘to hear people talk of their forefathers coming over with William the Conqueror; but these hounds which you see before you in their prime of health and condition are undoubted lineal descendants of those kenneled by the Norman king, and probably the best blood in the royal pack. As they are

well known to nearly all the gentlemen present, I need not occupy unnecessary time by speaking more about them. Put Crafty and Vanity up at any price you please, and remember they are to be sold. What shall we say for lot number two, the pride of the pack and the oldest blood in England?’

‘Fifty guineas,’ was the reply by what would appear a stranger from a distance ; for, although whispered, questions were put by many as to who the bidder was, nobody seemed to know.

‘Fifty guineas are bid for Crafty and Vanity,’ rejoined the auctioneer. ‘Why, it’s the price of an old song for the pride of the pack and the oldest blood in England. Any advance on fifty guineas? Going.’

‘Five,’ returned a voice.

‘Fifty-five,’ added the auctioneer, ‘is bid for lot number two. Any advance on fifty-five? Going, going,’ and he lifted his hammer, but with no intention of bringing it down so promptly as he appeared to threaten.

‘Sixty,’ said the stranger from a distance.

‘No reserve, recollect,’ ejaculated the auctioneer. ‘They are to be sold with all that’s offered for sale to-day. Any advance on sixty guineas for Crafty and Vanity?’ and he once more raised his hammer. ‘Going.’

There was now a pause of some duration in the bidding and twice the auctioneer cried ‘going,’ with his hammer lifted above his head, when, to the petrifying astonishment of everyone present, Bill Baxter, who continued to hold ‘the

pride of the pack' coupled in the middle of the ring, jerked his head sideways towards the auctioneer, and added in a firm voice, as if a well-considered intention accompanied it, 'Sixty-five.'

The auctioneer arrived at the hasty conclusion that either his eyes and ears had deceived him most unaccountably, or that Bill Baxter had suddenly become a confirmed lunatic on the spot.

The auctioneer stared with blinkless eyelids at Bill Baxter without saying a word, and Bill Baxter returned the look in corresponding silence.

'Sixty-five guineas!' at length exclaimed the auctioneer, addressing the second whipper-in. 'Do you mean to say that you, Bill Baxter, bid sixty-five guineas for Crafty and Vanity?'

‘I do, sir,’ quietly responded Bill Baxter.

‘A commission, I suppose,’ rejoined the auctioneer, ‘otherwise it might be suspected that lot number two had a reserved price, and if so I know nothing about it.’

‘You need not be afraid, sir,’ returned Bill Baxter. ‘All is fair and square here.’

‘If it’s no secret, then,’ added the auctioneer, ‘let’s have the name of the purchaser of this couple of hounds, the pride of the pack.’

‘Miss Penelope Peepem of Forester’s Lodge,’ replied Bill Baxter, with a glow of pride mantling over his features as he made the public announcement.

A loud clapping of hands followed with cries of ‘*Bra-vo* !’

‘The best of the old blood, then, is not to leave this part of the county,’ observed

Tom Brown, throwing up his hat and catching it dexterously. 'The Peepems are the right sort and, no doubt, mean to start a subscription pack with, perhaps, Miss Grizzle as the M.F.H., and a better or more popular one couldn't be found in all Hampshire;' such was the expressed opinion of Tom Brown, the yeoman.

Upon the excitement of this episode having abated, the sale of the remainder of the hounds proceeded without interruption or any special feature attracting particular notice. It was generally conceded, however, that the lots, as they were knocked down, fetched great if not unprecedented prices, and no pack offered for sale before, within the memory of the oldest sportsman present, ever fetched so much money as the Oakacre foxhounds.

Next in turn followed the stud of light-

weight carrying hunters, two hacks, and one horse, aged, that had carried the whipper-in for several successive seasons.

‘The whole are to be sold, recollect,’ said the auctioneer, ‘at whatever prices they will fetch.’

For some unexplained reason the aged horse that ‘had carried the whipper-in for several successive seasons’ was brought forward as the first lot for public competition.

‘What shall we say for this well-known, seasoned and useful hunter?’ asked the auctioneer, as Bill Baxter led the ‘old ’oss’ into the centre of the ring formed by the spectators. ‘What shall we say for him?’

No offer being made, notwithstanding the blandishments of the auctioneer, who expatiated eloquently upon what the ‘old

'oss' had done as conclusive proof of what he might be expected to do.

'There was a time,' said the auctioneer, 'when he could run clean away from his own shadow and leave it standing still. As for jumping—he'd go straight for a fly at the chancel of a parish church. No pace was too fast, no day too long. The further he went the fresher he galloped, and never knew what sixteen stone seven pounds meant in negotiating six feet of timber or brick. That's the kind of cross-country animal he was in days gone by, gentlemen, when he was reckoned the best horse in the squire's stable. What will you put him in at? Recollect he is to be sold at whatever price he will fetch.'

'Forty shillings,' and the reply was followed closely by a loud laugh from the general body of spectators.

‘And sixpence,’ was the supplementary bid to the modest offer of forty shillings, and this brought forth a louder laugh from the same hilarious body of spectators who seemed quite oblivious of the wide difference in the ‘old ’oss’ between the past and the present.

‘Forty shillings and sixpence are bid for this once perfection of a hunter,’ said the auctioneer. ‘It shows what the very best of us may come to in horsekind and mankind. Yes, gentlemen,’ continued he, ‘the proudest in the land are not safe from the cat’s meat barrow! Any advance on forty shillings and sixpence? Going,’ his hammer was lifted. ‘Going,’ he repeated, and it fell with a sharp and loud click, sealing the fate of the ‘old ’oss.’

As Bill Baxter slowly led him from the spot, it was noticed that the whipper-in

rubbed the nose of the 'old oss,' as soft as velvet, with a gentle action, and now and again pressed his cheek against it and held it there.

When the moment for parting arrived the traces of tears, shed in silent sorrow, might have been seen on the velvet nose of the 'old 'oss.'

CHAPTER XIV.

THE library in Oakacre Court, had been the scene of more than one interesting discussion between the chairman of the Gold Company and its promoter; but from the serious and earnest manner in which they were speaking to each other it might be readily inferred that the present conference was quite as important as any that had preceded it.

It was on the morning of the sale of the hounds and hunters, that John Oakacre and Orlando Chickabiddy were sitting to-

gether talking of pecuniary exigencies, dishonoured bills, and hostile legal proceedings, which threatened absolute ruin, at least, to one of the two present.

‘I think, sir,’ observed Orlando Chickabiddy, and he spoke as if he had met with a recent injury at the hands of the squire, ‘that you should have consulted me before taking so decided a step as breaking up your hunting establishment. With a little tact,’ continued he, ‘and judicious, financial skill, it might have been averted, and no one can tell what may turn up when time is given for the teetotum of chance to spin round. I have known some men, Mr. Oakacre, penniless, and hopelessly insolvent, pull through their difficulties, and leave large fortunes behind them by persistently keeping up appearances. Credit being capital, and credit more

frequently than not depending upon appearances, far removed as they may be from what they seem to represent, it behoves every man of the world, who means to take a front seat, to keep them up at all cost and any hazard. In truth and in fact, Mr. Oakacre, it is one of the secrets of success. However much of a sham the outward effects may be of the way in which society moves and lives, it signifies but little so long as it is not found out to be a deception, the difficulty being, perhaps, to prevent the discovery. In keeping up a show of wealth, as numbers of the Middlesex families manage to do without professing any, almost unlimited credit is established, and it seems strange, indeed, when the collapse comes, as it often does, to find the supposed and acknowledged capitalist not only without a shilling of

his own, but that he never possessed one.'

'It appears to me,' said the squire, 'that these proceedings are nothing short of swindling or robbery of the most flagrant description.'

'These are harsh terms, Mr. Oakacre,' rejoined Orlando Chickabiddy, 'and the law is not so severe as yourself in giving these creditor and debtor cases milder titles without imputing the smallest criminality.'

'Which proves that a great distinction is often made,' returned the squire, 'where there is no difference.'

'It may be sometimes a matter of vital expediency to support one's credit by the best means in one's power, regardless of the consequences,' resumed Orlando Chickabiddy, 'and you could not, in my opinion, Mr. Oakacre, have taken a more

effective step to ruin your own than by the sale of your hounds and hunters. It advertises the undeniable fact that you and your money have parted company, and this should have been kept from the knowledge of the public as long as possible.'

'Why?' shortly asked the squire.

'In order that your credit, Mr. Oak-acre, might not be prematurely injured,' responded Mr. Orlando Chickabiddy, 'and thus prevent you from operating in the meantime so as to put you straight on your legs again. Your shares in the gold mine,' continued he, 'may be affected by this ill-advised proceeding.'

'As they are worth nothing,' rejoined the squire, with a sneer, 'I cannot see how their value is to be les-

sened by anything I have done or can do.'

'But as I have before stated upon many previous occasions,' returned Orlando Chickabiddy, 'it does not follow that because the shares in a gold mine, or for that matter in any other, be it iron, coal, lead, copper, or tin, are looked upon as worth only the price of waste paper, but they may be rushed to an exorbitant premium upon the circulation of a mere fabricated report that the metal has at length been found in superabundant quantities. There is nothing, sir, so full of hope with the speculating public as a mine, and above all a gold mine. People think that at any moment the pickaxe and spade may bring about all their most sanguine expectations have pictured, and fresh investors may easily be

found to try at a tempting price their chance of success in what others have so practically and signally failed to accomplish.'

'Without pretending to dispute anything you have said,' added the squire, 'for I know little or nothing about matters of this kind, I feel that as nearly the whole of my rental is absorbed for years to come, I am bound in common honesty to decrease my expenditure and economise my means in every possible way. The first step, therefore, as it appeared to me, was to break up my hunting establishment.'

'You should have consulted me, Mr. Oakacre, before taking it,' responded Orlando Chickabiddy, in a petulant tone. 'In supporting your credit our united interests are at stake. I have done, as

you know, the best in my power to enable you to meet your engagements, and I have never hesitated to continue that assistance when required, although often at personal sacrifice to my own convenience.

‘Without blaming you, sir, or offering the shadow of a reproach, even in a thought,’ rejoined the squire, ‘I cannot forget that through your counsel and advice I am a ruined man. In consulting you, Mr. Chickabiddy, from time to time, as to what was best to be done,’ continued he, ‘nothing more unfortunate could be than the results that followed. They were always the direct opposite of that which I was led to expect, and loss was added to loss, until I had scarcely anything more to lose. I, therefore, thought that the time had come for

me to consult myself alone, in order that I might not lose the only thing of value left—my honour.’

‘You should remember, Mr. Oakacre, that, in providing for your calls on the shares, unpaid acceptances, and obligations generally, I am your principal creditor,’ observed Orlando Chickabiddy; ‘and I think, therefore, that you should have taken me into your confidence before adopting so decided a step as selling your hounds and hunters. It informs everyone in the county, from the highest to the most humble, that the gold mine may be looked upon as a complete failure, and our united interests are that exactly the reverse should be the public belief.’

‘How is that within the range of possibility?’ asked the squire.

‘Nothing is impossible with speculative shareholders,’ replied Orlando Chickabiddy. ‘As the promoter of a long list of companies,’ continued he, ‘I say, without fear of contradiction, that they will swallow any bait that has a look of reality about it, no matter what. The hooks have only to be covered with red rag, and you may land your fish without an effort.’

‘I do not perceive the object of your remarks,’ observed the squire. ‘Plain matters of fact, and truthful as they may possibly be.’

‘Listen patiently for a few moments,’ replied Orlando Chickabiddy, ‘and you will discover it. This morning’s post brought me the information that a petition is being prepared to wind up the company, and in a few days will be

presented for the consideration of the Court of Chancery. If an order were granted, every shilling of your money, Mr. Oakacre, and that of your friends, would be irretrievably lost. It is, therefore, necessary that it should be opposed by all the means in our power, foul or fair. You, as the chairman of the company and largest shareholder in it, are bound to take the foremost place in meeting this hostile measure, and I will prepare the means for your doing so. Winding up, Mr. Oakacre, would be ruin to you, and the gravest wrong and injury to me.'

'Fearing the worst,' rejoined the squire, with a deep-drawn sigh, 'I am prepared to accept the inevitable with as much stoicism as I can summon to my aid.'

'Not being a man of business, sir,' returned Orlando Chickabiddy, 'you can-

not be aware of the thin and tender threads upon which momentous issues rest. One unintentional word spoken at random, and a line written without a thought, have made men of straw, men of substance, and men of substance'—the speaker made an effective break in the sentence, and then added—'paupers.'

The squire said nothing in reply, but rested in his chair, as if wearied with what he heard, and was still listening to.

'It is not too late,' resumed his companion, 'for you to get out of this gold-mine company without the loss of a shilling, if you will consent to be guided by me, notwithstanding the reckless imprudence of the sale of this morning.'

'It seems needless for me to state that I shall be only too glad,' responded the

squire, 'if you will inform me how my deliverance is to be achieved. Remembering the past, I cannot believe in the possibility of its existence.'

Orlando Chickabiddy jerked his chair several inches closer to the squire, and then said, glancing over his right and left shoulders to make sure that no third person was present, 'the shares in the goldmine will go up like a sky-rocket before the order for winding-up can be made, and then yours, sir, shall be slipped at the right moment, and your money got back. The bills which I hold of yours, instead of scarcely representing the value of the stamps upon which they are written, will be taken up, and everything in so far as we are personally concerned rendered pleasant and profitable in the extreme.'

'You forget the omission of not having

told me how this magical change is to be effected,' remarked the squire, with a smile of incredulity upon his lips.

Orlando Chickabiddy again looked suspiciously over his right and left shoulders, and then added, in a confidential whisper,

'I'll *salt the mine*,' and, rising from his seat, hurriedly took his departure before the squire could ask a question as to what 'salting the mine' meant.

CHAPTER XV.

MISS PENELOPE PEEPEM and the giant were taking a constitutional walk among the trees and shrubberies of Forester's Lodge, concealed, if not altogether hidden, from vulgar public gaze, and having a little pleasant, cosy chat about things of the past and things to come.

The 'most lovable of aunts' leant on the arm of her stalwart nephew, and he, with his head turned towards her, was listening to all she had to say with pro-

found attention, and occasionally painful interest.

‘I can scarcely express to you, my dear giant, the acuteness of my sensitive feelings as the day named for Griselda’s marriage approaches,’ observed she, with a shake of the head which published the bald spot beyond a transitory glimpse. ‘They really are sometimes almost insupportable. I do my best to bear up against the depressing influence, but not possessing your great physical strength, my dear giant, I feel too often ready to sink into the ground.’

‘Let us speak of something else, then, less trying to your nerves, most lovable of aunts,’ replied he. ‘It may be quite as acceptable to both of us during this delightful walk, which I almost superstitiously believe will be remembered by me

as something marked in my life by a white stone. I feel so supremely happy in being with you again in the old spot where I used to play as a boy and romp with Griselda. It brings back in all their freshness the merry scenes of the long past, which may be recalled, but can never be renewed.'

'To hear you speak in this eloquent way, giant, makes me feel proud of having such a nephew,' rejoined she. 'It must be, I suppose, studying for the Bar, or the legal air of the Middle Temple, which has rendered you such an orator.'

Edward Slomax laughed at the compliment, and drew his 'most lovable of aunts' closer to his side.

And so they walked on among the trees and shrubberies of Forester's Lodge, talking about many things of interest; but,

as if by mutual consent, the topic which was at first started, Griselda's approaching marriage, was not included among them.

'You may well feel surprise,' said Miss Penelope Peepem, continuing their discourse, 'at learning that I and your cousin bought no less than four of John Oakacre's foxhounds; but we did so with the intention of returning them to him, as the best of his magnificent pack, when the gold-mine turns out a success, and he is enabled again to start his hunting establishment upon the same scale as before he relinquished it.'

'When the gold-mine turns out a success!' repeated he.

'As I am daily assured it will in the most solemn language and pious manner by Orlando,' rejoined Miss Penelope Peep-

em. ‘He says that just beneath the longitudinal section, which much disappointed him by not yielding an ounce of gold where tons were reasonably expected, the precious metal will be found as a matter of certainty in great quantities. Orlando continually says this to me, and I believe Orlando.’

‘Orlando!’ reiterated he, with a curl of the upper lip. ‘That sounds strange to my ears.’

‘You must not be jealous, my dear giant,’ returned Miss Penelope Peepem, ‘in my having dropped the surname of Chickabiddy. I can’t say that I ever liked it much. But then, as the swan of Avon wrote, “What’s in a name? A rose by any other would smell as sweet,” and this I have successfully persuaded myself is a parallel and corresponding case with Or-

lando. Taking all things into consideration,' continued she, 'it is a most desirable match for your cousin, giant, and I am perfectly satisfied with her matrimonial prospects.'

He made no observation in reply, and the conversation between them dropped for a short time.

'I have not told you that in buying the foxhounds for John Oakacre,' returned Miss Penelope Peepem, 'I had to apply to my man of business to advance the purchase-money, and, upon understanding what I wanted it for, he seemed to think that the act was not governed by the principles of strict prudence or economy.'

'I am not surprised at that,' observed her companion, 'although it was for your consideration rather than his.'

‘Knowing how John Oakacre loved and valued Crafty and Vanity,’ resumed she, ‘I could not allow that they should go into the possession of a stranger, and Griselda entertained the same affectionate feelings for Grumble and Growler. But as Orlando says the sale should not have taken place at all. With the exercise of a little patience, which John Oakacre never possessed, not a hound or a horse would have been sold.. I have Orlando’s authority for stating this without reservation, and he must know much better than anybody else. But John Oakacre always acted upon impulse,’ continued Miss Penelope Peepem. ‘As a young man his actions were never properly weighed before committing them, and sometimes scarcely excusable from their impulsive-ness. I remember several ;’ and her head

shook so as to make the diminutive lace cap flutter in the breeze, and publish to full view the bald spot it not unfrequently failed to secrete. 'I remember several,' repeated she, 'and I was compelled to remonstrate with him upon more occasions than one, and urge the propriety of putting a wholesome check upon his unrestrained feelings.'

'You, most lovable of aunts, hold a few shares in this gold mine, I believe,' observed her nephew, after a pause in their discourse.

'I do, giant,' replied she. 'I have the great pleasure of stating that I have twenty shares of one hundred pounds each allotted to me at what Orlando calls par, and I am told by him that they will be of prodigious value in the course of time.'

‘If I were to express an opinion totally different,’ remarked her companion, ‘you would not pay much heed to it.’

‘I certainly should not, but still continue to believe Orlando,’ rejoined Miss Penelope Peepem. ‘His knowledge concerning everything belonging to the mine is most perfect and complete, and he says the gold having been once discovered above the longitudinal section shows that the indications are more than favourable for its being found beneath it when the lower level of the quartz is reached. In short, my dear giant, I shall be so rich that I shall not know what to do with my money; but rest assured that a liberal share of it shall be yours with the clear understanding that the possession is not to render you indolent or interfere

in any way with your studies for the Bar.'

'Accept my positive assurance that any part of your wealth, coming from such a source,' added he, 'will not interrupt my day and night work for a moment as a reading man in Mrs. Chell's lodgings. You shall examine her yourself upon this matter of simple fact should it become necessary.'

'In that case you may depend upon having your allowance doubled at least,' responded Miss Penelope Peepem, 'and a quarter in advance to open a banker's account with. You will find it a pleasant occupation to draw cheques upon your balance at the banker's, particularly when it is not so close to being even on both sides the book as to render it expedient to add up the pence with great

care. I too often, my dear giant,' continued she, 'have to look with much attention to the pence column at certain fixed times and seasons, particularly just before the half-yearly remittances are made by my man of business. It is then that my attention is invariably drawn to the pence column.'

'There will be no necessity for this rigid care and economy,' rejoined her companion, smiling, 'when the gold is found beneath the longitudinal section.'

'None whatever,' seriously added Miss Penelope Peepem. 'I shall then confine my attention to the pounds only, and not trouble myself about the pence.'

'It is wiser to do the reverse, I have heard,' said he. 'But here comes my cousin;' and, as he spoke, Griselda appeared walking towards them, with Sam

by her side, looking grave and sedate, like a thoughtful dog having things of weight and responsibility upon his mind.

‘I was wondering where you were hiding yourself this morning,’ observed Edward Slomax, greeting her in a cheerful voice and manner; and, extending a hand, drew her towards him, and impressed a kiss upon her peach-like cheek, flushed with health.

‘You admit, then,’ she replied, ‘having bestowed one thought upon me.’

‘One thought!’ he exclaimed. ‘Why, I am always thinking of you and Sam. The two are inseparable from my thoughts.’

Sam squatted himself deliberately in front of Edward Slomax, and, staring at him full in the face, said, as plainly as a dog could speak,

‘You may bamboozle her, but you can’t me. I’m Sam, not a confiding young lady; but a sly old dog.’

‘You have not given yourself the trouble of recording much of this constant thinking of Sam and myself,’ responded Griselda, ‘by writing frequently either about one or to the other. Your letters of late have been few and far between.’

‘As you well know,’ telegraphed Sam, by throwing himself upon his back and indulging in a luxurious roll upon the grass, ‘if ever there was a shining humbug you are one,’ continued he, regaining his feet and giving himself a vigorous shake by way of completing his toilet, begun when he rose with a stretch from his straw bed.

‘A man [reading for the Bar,’ re-

joined Edward Slomax, trying his utmost to look serious, 'has not much time to spare for writing to his friends and——'

'Acquaintances,' added Griselda. 'For I still claim to be an acquaintance, however slight and precarious the intimacy may be.'

'It ought not to be either one or the other,' returned he, 'considering the length of time it has existed.'

'Does time, then, strengthen acquaintanceship?' asked Griselda. 'I have thought otherwise lately.'

Sam yawned, as if wearied with this discussion, and wanted something more stimulating to engage his attention.

Cock Robin now approached and announced the arrival of Doctor Tom Tidy on his weekly professional visit to Miss

Penelope Peepem, who at once took her departure, leaving the cousins alone with Sam.

CHAPTER XVI.

‘My being here with you and Sam,’ said Edward Slomax, as they strolled together at a leisurely pace under the thick foliage of the overhanging trees, ‘makes me bitterly envious of the past, and spitefully discontented with the present.’

‘Why so?’ inquired she.

‘To think of the fun that you and I had together,’ continued he, ‘and to know that it’s all over now, makes me feel as wretched a fellow as ever lived. If we could only have remained, as we were, two happy

little kids—you my child wife, and I your little boy husband, who was soundly thrashed sometimes to his great enjoyment—what an improvement upon our lives it would have been. In growing up, as it is called,’ continued he, ‘I fear that we have committed a fatal mistake.’

‘I wish with you, Teddy,’ responded Griselda, ‘that, instead of naturally growing up, we could artificially grow down, and again take to our dolls, hoops, kites, and balls. I was then so happy with you for my playfellow, wanting no one besides, and nothing but what I possessed.’

‘What a glorious state of mundane felicity!’ exclaimed he. ‘To have me for your playmate, and wanting no one and nothing but what was in your absolute possession. I cannot conceive a more perfect state of earthly bliss.’

‘I might not then have understood how much I had to be grateful for, Teddy,’ rejoined Griselda, with a laugh that was just heard, but the effect of which was scarcely seen. ‘You used, I remember,’ continued she, ‘to introduce the novelty of tickling my nose with a feather when rocked in the arms of Nature’s soft nurse and asleep, or thrusting a straw into my ears by way of a change in the instruments of torture. Do you recollect these early practical jokes of yours played upon your child-wife, Teddy?’

He remembered them well, and was frank enough to say so.

‘And you were most affectionately forgiving in all I did,’ responded he, ‘and seldom chased and thrashed me soundly more than twice or thrice for each offence of the kind. Nothing could more forcibly

illustrate the seasoning of justice with mercy than the retribution I received at your hands, although I sometimes thought the ash plant supplied by Cock Robin quite thick enough for the purpose, and too full of knobs.'

'It was great fun !' ejaculated Griselda. 'Nothing pleased me more than to make you run and shout to be rescued by my aunt, who always took your part because you got the worst of it in the end.'

'In order that, as usual, she might take the side of the oppressed,' returned he. 'An unexceptional rule with my most lovable of aunts.'

'You were never attacked until you greatly provoked me to apply the ash plant,' added Griselda.

'That's a matter of prosaic history, I fear,' said Edward Slomax. 'But the

provocation was given as a proof of my early and everlasting love for my little terminant of a wife.'

'Everlasting love for me!' exclaimed Griselda, stopping in her walk, and looking at him with a stedfast, penetrating gaze. 'I thought the feeling you entertained for me, call it by what name you like, was of the most ephemeral kind, and left no trace of ever having been.'

'Your thoughts then,' replied he, 'were diametrically opposed to the simple truth. As my child wife I loved you with the feelings of a child, which grew as I grew, and strengthened day by day, and year by year, until I awoke from the dream and saw that my child wife was a woman.'

'And then you ceased to love me,' rejoined Griselda. 'Was that so?'

'No,' responded her companion, and as

the word fell from his lips it sounded as if prompted by his heart. ‘The love for my child wife had taken too deep a root for it ever to be stopped or checked by fate itself. But I felt that as a woman, Griselda, I must no longer talk to you, or think of you, as I had done when you were my child wife, and I your plague of a little boy husband, who often teased you for the supreme pleasure of being chased and thrashed. My most lovable of aunts,’ continued he, ‘had set her loving heart upon your marrying a rich man, and your devoted juvenile cousin was not only penniless, but without the means of earning a penny. What, then, would have been her thoughts of me had she even suspected for a moment the presumption of my being seriously in love with you?’

‘Perhaps the same as when she hoped

that John Oakacre was seriously in love with her,' rejoined Griselda.

'But he would have been justified in being a suitor for her hand,' returned Edward Slomax, 'as the possessor of ample means to support a wife becoming her position as mistress of Oakacre Court.'

'In my opinion,' returned Griselda, 'Miss Penelope Peepem in the early part of the present century would not have been too exacting about the sufficiency of the means so long as the end was attained. She always so much admired the old county family of the Oakacres.'

'And with sufficient reason,' added her companion, 'as a stainless race of English gentlemen beyond reproach and above suspicion.'

'How dear aunt's sanguine hopes and ardent expectations were doomed to dis-

appointment,' returned Griselda, 'I never could quite understand, for even now one looks, occasionally, ready to propose and the other to accept.'

'They now and then feel the latent warmth of their earlier days,' returned Edward Slomax. 'Well, it is only turning the hour glass upside down and living them over again!'

Sam here gave a wide and loud yawn, to remind them, perhaps, that he was wearied with this branch of the subject, and wanted it improved in interest with as little loss of time as possible.

'From what you have just told me, then, Teddy, although the secret has been well kept until now,' observed Griselda, 'I am to believe that the love you entertained for me as your child-wife has been continued without interruption to this very hour of my life.'

‘Indeed you may well believe it,’ responded he, ‘and as much so as if it formed part of your religious faith, for it is founded upon truth.’

‘And yet you never said so before,’ rejoined Griselda. ‘Why was that?’

‘Because that nothing I could say or do,’ returned he, ‘might influence your resolution in complying with our most lovable aunt’s absorbing desire for you to marry a rich man. I had nothing. Orlando Chickabiddy was reputed to possess a gold-mine. As I have often said,’ continued he, ‘to dear Jenny Chell, I was too heavily handicapped to have more than a good view of the race.’

‘And so you have loved me, Teddy,’ added she, reproachfully, ‘all these years in silence, and had not the courage to tell me so until it was—*too late*?’

By a scarcely audible growl, which might be said to have been almost whispered, Sam intimated that their privacy was about being disturbed by the unwelcome approach of somebody, heard by him, but as yet unseen.

Within the brief period of a few seconds, Miss Penelope Peepem made her appearance from behind a thick screen of evergreens, and communicated the interesting fact that 'her medical man had only just brought his professional visit to a close, otherwise she should have returned long before.'

CHAPTER XVII.

ORLANDO CHICKABIDDY, having completed his plan and arrangements for 'salting the mine,' was now waiting with feverish expectation and anxious dread for the result, which, as he knew, must soon become a public secret, instead of continuing a strictly private one, confined to himself alone.

'We are the creatures of circumstances,' observed he, philosophically, sitting before a table on which was a heap of opened letters, newspapers, and writing materials.

‘We are the creatures of circumstances,’ repeated he, ‘which pull, and drag, and drive us here, there, and everywhere, without our having any more control over our movements than a bit of thistledown blown about in the wind. We seem to be our own masters of our own actions, but we are not. Now what am I scheming to do at the present moment? Why, just the opposite of what I was scheming to do a few weeks since. I intended to drop John Oakacre into the hole, as the chairman and largest shareholder in the company, and that, too, up to his very eyelids. It was my intention to have his possessions in the county of Hampshire, and for him to have my auriferous property in South America, but nothing to the value of a farthing besides. An end, however, is put to all this snug and profit-

able arrangement, and by what? Circumstances,' said he, giving a reply to his own question, 'nothing but circumstances over which I not only had no control but worse still they controlled me.'

Orlando Chickabiddy looked much oppressed with the weight of thought at this moment and became absorbed for a few seconds in silent reflection.

'If I were not about doing that upon which I have long fixed my whole heart,' resumed he, 'marrying the prettiest girl in all the county, and making every young chap envious and jealous of me, I would have Oakacre Court and John Oakacre might have the South American property in exchange with an undisputed title. But in that case what would Mrs. Chickabiddy say, and continue to say, as

long as she had a tongue to speak and I ears to hear?

‘I should catch it hot and strong morning, noon, and night from the beginning of the week to the end all the year round. There would never be a moment’s peace in the house or out of it with her old friend John Oakacre turned out of his home to wander about where he might for a stray dinner. In order to avoid, therefore, a rock which must have knocked my little skiff into splinters, I determined to go upon another tack and make an effort to ease him of some of his difficulties, and be satisfied with annexing a moiety of his possessions instead of wrecking the whole, an act that deserves more praise than it is likely to get.

‘Look at it as I would,’ continued he, after a slight break in the soliloquy, ‘the

situation was anything but favourable, and I came to the conclusion that unless the gold mine shares could be rushed up so as to slip John Oakacre's at the proper moment, and thereby secure the hard cash to the amount, at least, of his bills in my hands, it would turn out in the end a devilish bad bit of business for me compared with what my hopes were of sacking a big swag of money by the promotion of the company. It is true that I have a pretty big bit in hand by the sale of the mine; but I wanted more, and such is my natural feeling that the more that can be got out of anything, or anyone, the more I want and try to get, being not too nice or particular as to the means, which no man ought to be who intends to win the game he is playing at.

‘Marked cards? yes. Loaded dice? yes.

Bubble companies? yes. False balance sheets? yes. Guinea-pig directors? yes. Insolvent and fraudulent managers? yes. Runaway secretaries? yes. Dividends paid out of capital? yes. These are the certainties by which experienced talent takes advantage of brainless asses, and so long as men and women continue to live to make fools of themselves, or be made fools of, so long will the inexhaustible family of the flats be the helpless and plucked pigeons of the sharps.

‘Now, in John Oakacre I found as innocent a lamb as ever was skinned; but I must be content with what I have got out of him, and the money to come in for his shares when they are rushed up to a good marketable figure by salting the mine, which is progressing, I see by these letters, as well and favourably as I could wish.

‘The report of a rich vein of ore having been discovered,’ continued he, ‘will soon be forwarded, and the once fondly-anticipated result of upwards of four ounces to the ton be circulated far and wide to the gratified and astonished ears of the hitherto despairing shareholders.’

‘Ha! ha, ha!’ chuckled Orlando Chickabiddy, ‘ha, ha, ha! They little think,’ continued he, ‘that the rich vein of ore containing upwards of four ounces of pure gold to the ton was placed where it was found by my secret orders. They little think that the specimen sent direct from the captain of the mine, with the elaborate details of the weight of the crushed quartz, and the carefully ascertained quantity of gold yielded, were all prepared by me in my own mansion

called Hawkhurst in the county of Hampshire.

‘The poor deluded imbecile fools don’t know what salting a mine means. I do.

‘Nothing short of worst luck,’ resumed he, ‘than was ever heard of in this world, and that’s saying a good deal, considering the drawbacks, can prevent a rise in the shares, and thus enable me to slip John Oakacre’s and get him out of the scrape. He must not be skinned like a lamb or I should never hear the last of it from Mrs. Chickabiddy.

‘The game I have to play,’ continued he, ‘and am playing, is led, followed, and hemmed in with dangers and difficulties, and yet it does not vary much from several ventures of a similar kind which I have brought to a successful issue, run-

ning great risks for large profits. As a professional promoter of bubble companies, and general vendor of bubble schemes, I might have been, as I may be, found out; but if I am my nest will be discovered to be well-lined.

‘There is no such power on earth as money,’ continued Orlando Chickabiddy, glancing at the ceiling directly above his head, and slowly folding his arms across his pigeon breast, and I understand its full force from two distinct and separate causes. One when I could not call a sixpence my own, and the other when I had defaulters hammered on the Stock Exchange to the tune of thousands upon thousands. Many a speculator knew to his cost when I was the head of a syndicate either for the rise or fall, for nothing could be more certain than a

big loss to either the bulls or the bears, in accordance with which way the wires were secretly pulled behind the scenes.

‘I then held the trump-cards in my own hand, as I do now in this gold-mine venture; but I must take care to play them cleverly, so that I’m not found out, otherwise the threatened petition for winding up might lead to more unpleasant proceedings.

‘Sooner or later, however, it must be known by those deeply interested in the operation what salting a mine means in all its simplicity.’

Such was the peroration of Orlando Chickabiddy’s speech, addressed to an auditory composed of himself.

CHAPTER XVIII.

AMONG Mrs. John Sprat's amenities in her duties as assistant to Tom Tidy, the licentiate of Apothecary's Hall, was rolling pills into little spherical balls between her finger and thumb, and, under his professional directions, mixing black draughts. It was evident to the most indifferent observer that Mrs. John Sprat took no small degree of pleasure in preparing unpalatable doses for those supposed to be in want of them, and, the more nauseous their taste, the greater the satisfaction to

the dispenser, for she had a pleasant and lasting impression upon her memory that bitter stuff for 'others' interfered in no remote way with her own palate. In truth—if a veracious statement is to be made without reservation—Mrs. John Sprat recollected that physic for other people was not physic for herself, and she felt slightly more pleased than otherwise when informed that her mixtures produced 'in others' a tendency to cramp rather than a sensation of ease and repose to the system. In short, Mrs. John Sprat partook largely of the flinty nature of the world, and reflected with no great mental distress upon the physical pains and twinges borne by her friends, neighbours, and acquaintances. Being 'of the earth,' she was most decidedly 'earthy.'

It was eventide, and the duly qualified

practitioner and his assistant were resting after the toils of the day, the former leg-weary from his long pursuit of rare specimens for his collection, and the latter from the somewhat monotonous occupation of rolling pills, not by machinery, and mixing black draughts.

‘You have heard, I s’pose,’ observed she, in rather a sharp-edge tone of voice, as if her present temper was not quite so even as might be desired for agreeable society. ‘You have heard, I s’pose,’ repeated Mrs. John Sprat, with a twitch of the nose not dissimilar to that of a rabbit’s, ‘that the day of this long-talked-of marriage is fixed at last, and time it was, I think.’

Tom Tidy had not been told of the absolute day for Miss Griselda’s marriage; but believed, from confidential and private information received at the last profes-

sional visit paid to Forester's Lodge, that it was not far off, or, at any rate, very distant.

'The interesting event,' rejoined Mrs. John Sprat, with a sneer, for she made no secret that, forming one of the rank and file of the noble army of widows left for long in an inconsolable condition, she hated weddings with a feeling too deep for ordinary language to express—'the interesting event,' repeated she, and the rabbit-like twitching of her nose became more distinct and rapid, 'is fixed for the first of next April.'

It was not often that the licentiate of Apothecary's Hall felt the slightest inclination to be hilarious, for his life and the lives of 'others,' as they appeared to him, were much too serious matters for laughing about; but, upon the first of

April being given as the precise day for the marriage to take place, Tom Tidy gave vent to his unrestrained feelings, and for once in a way astonished his assistant with a loud 'Ha, ha, ha!'

'May I ask, Mr. Thomas Tidy,' observed Mrs. John Sprat, looking grave, and almost threatening, 'if it's not giving you too much trouble, sir, why you thought proper to laugh in my face?'

'Oh!' exclaimed he, as soon as it was possible for him to say anything, however brief, 'I was not laughing in your face, Mrs. John; but it really struck me as irresistibly funny that All Fool's Day should have been chosen for the most popular and interesting event of the kind that has taken place in these parts for many long years.'

'I s'pose, then, that you had not heard

of it before, Mr. Thomas Tidy,' rejoined she, still maintaining a rigid and inflexible expression of countenance, as was invariably the case when she addressed her employer in full.

'It was my good fortune,' returned the licentiate of Apothecary's Hall, in as conciliatory a manner as he could command, 'to learn the glad tidings of great joy from you, Mrs. John. I still think, however, that the first of April is an odd kind of day for a young lady to choose to be married on.'

'You do,' added Mrs. John Sprat, sharply. '*I* don't. It's the day of all others throughout the year for people to marry on, as nine out of ten make asses of themselves.'

'That's rather a strong term, Mrs. John,' responded the apothecary, depre-

catingly. 'Let us modify it by substituting noodles. I prefer noodles to asses as being fuller of Christian charity for the weak and misguided.'

'You were never married yourself,' remarked his assistant. 'Were you?'

'I never was,' replied he, with great firmness.

'And, therefore, know nothing about it,' rejoined Mrs. John Sprat. '*I* do, and shall stick to asses.'

'Who, may I ask,' inquired Tom Tidy, blandly, for he perceived that it was not an opportune moment for adding to the disturbance of Mrs. John Sprat's temper—'who, may I ask, informed you of All Fool's Day being selected for this most interesting event to be brought off?'

'That owdacious chap, Cock Robin, called here this morning,' responded his

assistant, 'to give me a shot, as he called it, for that stomach-pump business, and he told me——'

'And what was the nature of the shot?' inquired her employer, not without apprehension that an act of violence had been committed in his absence.

'Half a pound of stale butter and a couple of eggs not over fresh,' responded Mrs. John Sprat, pursing her lips together, and looking fiery in the extreme.

Tom Tidy expected further information, and waited patiently for it, but his assistant appeared resolved that the subject should be abruptly dropped, and vouchsafed not another word.

'And for what practical purposes,' at length meekly asked the licentiate of Apothecary's Hall, 'were the butter and eggs to be applied?'

‘To have a shy at me with,’ replied she. ‘But the owdacious young chap missed his mark, and only made your shop stink worse than it did.’

‘You escaped his wicked and malevolent design, then?’

‘By ducking my head, they flew over it,’ rejoined Mrs. John Sprat, ‘and I scored against his miss.’

‘Very nicely expressed,’ returned he, applauding the graphic description of Cock Robin’s failure, ‘and quite worthy of a cricketer of distinction. What followed, Mrs. John?’

‘I did,’ replied she, ‘with a mop just out of a pail of soapsuds.’

‘And——’

‘He swallowed more soapsuds than he is likely to swallow again as long as he lives,’ continued Mrs. John Sprat. ‘Didn’t I rub them into him, when I

drove him into a corner. I should just think I did !

‘And, as a matter of opinion,’ added Tom Tidy, ‘I think the rubbing in served him right, although we must not entirely forget the professional error of the stomach-pump as a set-off to his feelings. To some extent he has my sympathy, it having been, as it subsequently turned out, leg of mutton day when we administered the pump with such perfect success, and greatly, therefore, to the contentious violence which necessarily followed. Our friend Cock Robin, it is evident, has not forgotten, or forgiven, the unintentional wrong we committed, and, in seeking his revenge upon you, Mrs. John, I am not in the least surprised, although, I need scarcely add, it in no way meets with my sanction. I

think, indeed, that the dose of soapsuds was a fair and equitable return for his hostile demonstration with the stale butter and—as I reasonably infer—rotten eggs.’

‘The smell in your shop will tell you whether they were fresh or rotten,’ rejoined Mrs. John Sprat, with a violent twitching of the nose. ‘I s’pose he kept ’em buried for a month on purpose.’

‘Admitting that he did so, for the mere sake of argument,’ returned the licentiate of Apothecary’s Hall, ‘it only forms a slight addition to his stupendous iniquity.’

‘But I paid him out for it,’ added his assistant, closely buttoning up her lips. ‘He’ll never forget the dose of soapsuds, and I told him that I’d give him another if he ever called me Jack Sprat again.’

‘Then rest assured, Mrs. John,’ said Tom Tidy, with great deliberation, for the words came slowly from his lips, as if dropped like peas at short intervals. ‘Then rest assured, Mrs. John,’ repeated he, ‘that you will never again be called Jack. You may regard that indignity as a thing of the past, having no connection whatever with the future. It would be well, perhaps, for all of us to remember that the past is gone; the present is our own, and the future is unknown. In these respective tenses, Mrs. John, make an effort to treat Cock Robin’s reprehensible want of refined respect in having wantonly called you Jack Sprat, I fear, repeatedly.’

At this juncture this particular branch of the subject was finally disposed of, and, from an admission made by Mrs. John

Sprat that peace had been ratified between Cock Robin and herself, he related in strict confidence, which had been communicated to everyone he had either met or overtaken that morning, that the first of April was the day appointed for the marriage of Orlando Chickabiddy, Esquire, of Hawkhurst, and Miss Griselda Peepem, of Forester's Lodge, Hampshire.

CHAPTER XIX.

SLIGHT were the perceptible changes in the apple-tree; but those who now sat beneath its drooping branches were changed indeed. In their early childhood, Griselda and the 'giant'—when much too small to be physically qualified for that distinction—often played, laughed, and quarrelled under the apple-tree, and, as little children, entertained no thought of sitting beneath its shade when man and woman grown; and yet, years having rolled on, there they sat together in the pale light of the

crescent moon, man and woman grown, albeit still young, and with no witness near.

‘It seems hard,’ observed he, after a lengthened pause which neither seemed disposed to break, ‘very hard that this should be the last evening on earth that you and I should pass together in this old and well remembered spot.’

A close observer might have seen that these few words acted something like a galvanic shock upon Griselda; but the effect soon vanished.

‘To think,’ continued he, ‘that we who have been so happy together for long, long years past, can never meet again is more than enough to drive me mad, and I am not sure that it has not done so.’

Griselda threw back her head with an angry gesture, but said nothing in reply.

‘By my aunt’s wish,’ resumed he, ‘I am to see you married to-morrow, and, as the squire has declined to attend the ceremony at the last moment, to give you away.’

‘To give me away?’ she repeated, in a slow, sarcastic tone. ‘You will not hesitate to perform so easy and agreeable a task.’

‘Would you like to know what I should much prefer?’ he asked, laying hold of one of her hands and clasping it firmly in his.

‘Yes,’ was her answer. ‘Nothing at this moment, perhaps, would please me more.’

‘To follow you to your grave,’ replied he, in a hoarse and unsteady voice; ‘and instead of seeing the bridal wreath upon your brow, to place it, with my own hands, upon your coffin.’

‘Governed by my own inclination,’ rejoined Griselda, ‘such would be my choice.’

‘Do you really mean what you say?’ inquired he, bending forward and gazing earnestly in her face, which looked in the pale moonlight as if chiselled from marble.

‘When have you known me say that which I do not mean?’ she rejoined, and the words grated harshly upon his ears like a deserved reproach.

‘Never,’ returned he, ‘never.’

‘Ay,’ added Griselda, in a slow, deliberate tone, as if every word had been fully weighed in the balance of her thoughts, ‘you may believe me. I would much rather be taken to the church to-morrow morning a lifeless corpse than that which is often miscalled a happy bride.’

For a few seconds not a word was spoken by either.

‘I cannot allow this,’ at length said he, as if communing more with himself than speaking to Griselda. ‘At any cost or risk this shall not take place.’

‘Are you referring to my marriage?’ inquired Griselda, doubtful as to the meaning of his words.

‘Yes,’ responded he; ‘it must not at such a sacrifice as this, let the consequences be what they may to anyone or anything.’

‘But how is it to be prevented?’ she asked. ‘Tell me, Edward, or my hot brain will scorch with dreadful uncertainty.’

‘Give me your consent to be my wife,’ he returned, ‘and you shall escape, at least, the certainty of a miserable exist-

ence; for with such a man—if he deserves the name—nothing can be more inevitable than a life of daily and even hourly wretchedness. In becoming mine you may have to face poverty and all its attendant troubles. I have nothing, as you know, but still a voice whispers, sleeping and waking, that I shall not be always poor. This may be, I admit, nothing but a delusion, but still I feel confidence in myself, knowing that my best and unwearied efforts will never cease so long as the end remains unattained. With the knowledge of everything connected with my position, not having anything to relate or conceal, will you, Griselda, place yourself under my care and be my wife, loving and beloved, while our hearts shall continue to beat?’

Bewildered at his words, and with her senses almost stunned from what she had so unexpectedly listened to, Griselda could not at first give utterance to a syllable in reply, but sat with her hand in his, looking almost lifeless.

‘You hesitate?’ said he.

‘Not for a moment,’ she hastily rejoined — ‘not for a moment. I consent to all you ask, let death itself be the portion of my doing so.’

At the conclusion of the sentence, she was clasped passionately in his arms, and hot, burning kisses pressed upon her cheeks, which left a hectic flush upon them. And so they remained, with no witness of their ardent love but the light of the crescent moon.

‘But tell me,’ at length said Griselda, withdrawing from his embrace, while tears

might have been seen slowly stealing from her eyes, to which they had been hitherto almost strangers—‘but tell me,’ she repeated, ‘how is this to be done on the very eve of my marriage?’

‘There’s but one practicable course to adopt,’ responded he. ‘We must place Forester’s Lodge and ourselves many miles apart before sunrise to-morrow. In short, to apply a well-known phrase, we must bolt.’

‘How and where?’ asked Griselda, little short of feeling stupefied at the proposition.

‘Listen,’ rejoined he. ‘I will take Cock Robin into our confidence, and arrange with him for meeting us at a given point with barely sufficient of your wardrobe for our flight. As soon as we arrive——’

‘Where?’ asked Griselda, still under the influence of extreme astonishment.

‘In Middle Temple Lane,’ continued he, as if no break had occurred in the sentence, ‘I will place you in the robust arms and under the affectionate solicitude of the most glorious old girl on earth—Jenny Chell.’

‘But what will she do with me under the circumstances?’ inquired she.

‘Under the circumstances!’ he exclaimed. ‘Why, everything that under the circumstances will permit. There is nothing under the circumstances that Jenny Chell will not do her best to make as pleasant and easy as possible. She’s a grand old girl, and we have only to trust her to pull us through with lumps of weight in hand.’

‘But we cannot be married——’

‘Immediately upon our arrival in Middle Temple Lane?’ added he. ‘Certainly not, for although I am not well up in ecclesiastical law, I know that the banns must be read for the first time of asking, the middle time of asking, and the third time of asking, which means that an interval of three Sundays must necessarily take place before we can possibly be, in the eyes of the law, legally joined together in holy matrimony.’

‘But what is to become of me in the meantime?’ asked Griselda. ‘Where am I to go to, and with whom?’

‘Leave all that to Jenny Chell,’ responded he. ‘She’s a grand old girl, as you will soon find out, and she’ll arrange everything in a way little short of heavenly.’

‘But I must know what this arrange-

ment is to be before assenting to it,' observed Griselda.

'Put your trust in Jenny Chell,' responded he. 'She's a grand old girl. You have only to put your trust in Jenny Chell.'

'Ready and willing as I am to do this,' returned Griselda, 'I cannot depend solely upon her discretion, more particularly as a perfect stranger to me.'

'Oh! yes, you can, take my word for it,' added he. 'She's a grand old girl. You have only to put your trust in Jenny Chell. In fact, there's no alternative at the present moment. Upon our arrival in Middle Temple Lane, there will be nobody in about four millions, two hundred thousand of people that you can trust but Jenny Chell. She stands out singly and

alone in about four millions, two hundred thousand of people.'

'But I cannot go to your chambers, Edward, until we are married,' rejoined Griselda.

'I never said that you could,' returned he, 'never intimated that you could, except, perhaps, upon our arrival for a little refreshment in the shape of a cup of tea and bit of bread and butter. When you become a co-tenant with me in Jenny Chell's apartment, it must be, as a matter of course, upon the thorough and broad understanding that you are already my beloved and charming young wife. Nothing less would satisfy that grand old girl, Jenny Chell.'

'What will my aunt say?' said Griselda, with an involuntary raising of both her hands.

‘A great deal, no doubt,’ replied he, ‘with the introduction of much irrelevant matter. My most lovable aunt must have so much to say upon this delicate subject that I cannot conceive within measurable distance when it will be exhausted.’

‘She will be dreadfully angry, Edward,’ rejoined Griselda, ‘and can never forgive us.’

‘I am quite prepared for her just anger,’ returned he, ‘which will eventually be exploded in a continued series of indignant letters sown broadcast with superlatives. But as to my most lovable of aunts never forgiving us, that is a natural impossibility. The order of nature in such a case would be interrupted and rendered too exceptionally eccentric to be practicable.’

‘To your care, then, and protection, and

that of Jenny Chell,' added Griselda, 'I am to consign myself, it appears, without reservation.'

'And more faultless guardians,' said he, emphatically, 'could not be found on this side of the threshold of Paradise. Jenny is such a grand old girl!'

'I suppose that she has some female relative or other whom I can visit or lodge with during the arbitrary interval of our probation,' observed Griselda.

'Entertain not the shadow of a doubt upon that point,' responded he. 'Jenny Chell in all probability—although I never heard her speak one word upon the subject—has scores and hundreds of female relatives. There will be no difficulty in her finding one most eligible in every minute particular for our purpose, and we need not, I am sure, trouble our heads .

upon the subject for a single moment. Jenny Chell is such a grand old girl !

‘For the first time in my life,’ rejoined Griselda, ‘I positively tremble at what I am going to do.’

‘I am not at all surprised, dearest,’ returned he, again clasping her in his arms, ‘that you should feel something of this sort just at the present moment. It’s a very shaky business for all concerned, and to none more so than yourself, joy of my heart and soul ! running away is no joke for a young girl under ordinary circumstances ; but we are about to bolt under most extraordinary surroundings, quite unique and devoid, I should say without fear of contradiction, of any approach to a precedent. No wonder that you should quake and quiver a little at what we are about doing.

- It’s only one plunge, however, and no soon-

er shall we take the plucky header than we are sure to rise again to the surface and feel as refreshed as mermaids after combing their hair.'

'Tell me now what you expect me to do in preparing for this frightful conduct on my part,' said Griselda, 'for I feel that I must implicitly rely upon your instructions.'

'Go to your room, and select as few things as you can manage with for the journey,' replied he, 'and meet me here, under this very tree, as the hour hand points to the witching hour of twelve. I like midnight for deeds of darkness, and lovers running away can do so with much more safety than at noon. In the meantime,' he continued, 'I will enlighten Cock Robin as to our highly objectionable proceedings, and bind him to inviolable secrecy as to

what we have done, what we are doing, and what we are about to do. From an intimate acquaintanceship and long association with Cock Robin, I feel that I may depend upon his fidelity, knowing, as he does, that he would run the imminent risk of having his neck broken if he proved traitor to his trust. I will write an affecting and contrite letter to our most lovable of aunts praying eloquently for her forgiveness, and adding in the postscript that we fully expect to receive it. This shall be placed in the hands of Cock Robin to have delivered to his mistress at the exact time of her bed curtains being drawn to let in the light, and the window blinds jerked to fly upwards upon their springs for the same purpose. She will then be able to read the contents and display, without doubt, an amount of energetic astonishment, upon

reaching the end, too exaggerated to admit of description. It would have to be witnessed to be understood and fully appreciated.'

'Poor dear aunt!' exclaimed Griselda. 'How great will be her surprise, and how deep her mortification!'

'Both must follow as inevitable sequences,' responded he; 'but like the majority of mortal errors, whether of commission or omission, they may be traced directly to her own determination of persistently doing wrong in compelling you, sorely against your will, as she knew full well, to marry a gold mine which, in my opinion, will be found to contain not one single grain of gold. Our most lovable of aunts could not be otherwise than thoroughly acquainted with your feelings upon the subject, for they were constantly displayed in words,

looks, and acts, and yet she continued to persevere in the attempt to accomplish her purpose to what may be properly called the bitter end, and which must have culminated in your life long misery had it proved successful.'

'You begin to persuade me,' replied Griselda, 'that we are almost justified in——'

'Bolting,' added he, 'not the shadow of a doubt of it, and, therefore, as it is getting late, go at once and prepare for running away,' and thus speaking he pressed her again to his breast and kissed her with a lover's warmth upon cheeks, which were not so bloodless as they looked in the pale light of the crescent moon, under the drooping branches of the apple-tree.

From that instant in the world's bitter records of human frailty and blind selfishness Griselda's fate was sealed. She had consented to the most important act in her life on the spur of the moment.

END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.

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